Through the Worst of the Winter

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Through the Worst of the Winter

by almostvirginia

Summary

Desperate not to spend the rest of his days as a corporate drone, Charlie packs up his life and moves to Pelican Town to start a farm. The only thing is, Stardew Valley is full of distractions: stray puppies, nosy neighbors, monster-infested mines, lurking underground horrors. And then there's the most dangerous distraction of all—the sweet, shy town doctor, who Charlie can't seem to stop thinking about.

Harvey came to Pelican Town six years ago with a broken heart, a medical license, and a conviction that his best days were behind him. But when a sunburnt young farmer appears in his clinic one day, he finds himself wondering if his terminal loneliness might be curable, after all.

Who said country life was simple?

Notes

What started as a place to imagine little scenes between my farmer and his Pelican Town friends evolved, over a ridiculous amount of time, into more than 250,000 words of story. This is 100% written, not a WIP! I had originally intended to post a chapter or two a week, but since nearly everyone in the world is trapped indoors right now, I'm planning to post a chapter a day.

Most of the story will be at least somewhat canon-compliant, with the exception of certain characters having backstories, sexual preferences, etc. that aren't in the game. Also, seasons are three months long, not one! I also made up ages for the characters, because I don't think many are explicitly stated. A warning, or a promise: this fic will eventually earn its E rating, and then keep earning it, over and over. If that's not your thing, you may not want to start down this road. Later chapters will also contain descriptions of violence and/or medical situations, but nothing overly graphic and I'll warn you ahead of time. Tags will be added as chapters are, to avoid spoiling too much. Overall, I tried to keep this fic true to the spirit of Pelican Town: sweet, wholesome, and just a little bit dark around the edges. I hope you like it.

Chapter 1: Spring, Year 1

He'd done it. He'd actually done it.

Charlie stood on the rickety front porch of his new home, amazed by the silence now that the mayor and that carpenter had left. Save the wind blowing through the trees— *God, there were a lot of trees!* —there wasn't a sound to be heard: no passing cars, no upstairs neighbors, no sirens blaring. It was just him, his thoughts, and a backpack full of slightly rusty old tools. Just his own muscle, and a packet of parsnip seeds, and the deed to this overgrown patch of dirt.

"Oh, shit," he said out loud, as the weight of it all finally crashed down on him. He sat heavily on the porch steps. What had he *done?* Charlie had hated everything about his life, it was true—hated his pointless, boring job; hated his lonely little beige apartment; hated the sameness of it all, stretching into the future as far as he could imagine—but it had been *his life,* had been something he knew. Staring out over the acres of weeds and rocks, he tried to grasp at that feeling that had burned so brightly in his chest just three weeks ago, that feeling when he'd looked at his future and said *no. Not this, anything but this.* But that determined voice was now as silent as the trees around him.

He'd never felt more alone.

Charlie had imagined he'd feel free, when there were no more alarms to set, no more PTO to request, no more congested rush-hour commutes. Instead, he felt adrift. There wasn't one single person to tell him what to do, and he had no idea where to start. Why the hell had he thought he could hack it as a *farmer,* of all things? What kind of quarter-to-third-life crisis was this? Didn't people normally just buy a stupidly expensive car? Maybe his friends and his mom had been right; maybe this *had* been a ridiculous idea. He'd thought of himself as a reasonably confident person, but it was failing him now. Maybe he should have a beer. Maybe he should have a cry.

Fighting down the wave of despair, Charlie opened the backpack and rummaged through it, as though the instructions for his new life might be written down somewhere. They weren't, but he did find the letter again, the one from his grandfather that had led him to turn his whole life upside down. He read it again, feeling a tiny comfort from the familiar handwriting. When he finished, he tucked it into his shirt pocket. That was new, too: he'd given away most of his old clothes, trading businesslike button-downs and wool slacks for sturdy denim and flannel. At the time, he'd felt practical and outdoorsy. Now, wearing the plaid flannel shirt for the first time in his life, he felt like he'd put on a costume. Thank God he hadn't talked himself into overalls.

"The only difference between a farmer and someone dressed up as a farmer," Charlie said, out loud again, "is that one of them actually farms." Instantly, he was grateful there was no one around to hear him; in his head it had sounded profound, but spoken it just made him sound like an idiot. He hoped he wasn't going to turn into some kind of monologuing hermit. Still, though: there was something to it, wasn't there? If he wanted to be a farmer, he needed

to actually *start doing it.* He picked up the packet of parsnip seeds, looked out over the weedy land again, then put them down again. *Start small. There's gotta be something you know how to do.*

A big rock a few feet away caught his eye. He wasn't going to be growing anything with the ground still full of rocks. Standing up, he heaved the rusty old pickaxe onto his shoulder and waded out into the weeds. He might not know how to grow food; he might not know how to keep things alive; he might not know how to be in control of his own life; but he definitely knew how to break shit. And right now, hitting something really hard a bunch of times sounded like the best therapy he could afford.

Charlie flopped into bed five hours later, having spent the entire evening breaking up rocks and hauling them into a pile behind the house. He was drenched in sweat and his shoulders burned, but he had cleared out a decent little chunk of dirt, and he felt satisfied. He'd shoved a granola bar into his mouth two hours ago—thank God he'd brought some snacks, this house didn't even have a *kitchen*— and even his current hunger was outweighed by his exhaustion. Tomorrow he'd wake up, find breakfast somewhere, and get back to work on the rest of the rocks. He fell asleep almost instantly, content with that plan.

It was a good plan, but the moment Charlie woke up, he knew it wasn't going to happen. Before he'd even opened his eyes, his muscles began screaming at him. The ache in his shoulders had been joined by pain in his back, arms, and legs, and his hands were blistered from swinging the pickaxe. Even if he'd wanted to power through the aching muscles, there was no way he could wield tools with such painful hands. He groaned in frustration, burying his face into the pillow. *Good job, city boy,* he thought. *One day on the farm and you're already out of commission.*

Well, at the very least he could establish a routine. He looked at the clock, expecting it to be mid-morning, and was surprised to see that it was only 6:10. Apparently, the exhaustion-induced early bedtime and the morning light streaming brightly in through his window had made an early riser of him. In spite of his aching body, he felt well-rested.

After pulling on fresh clothes and splashing his face with water from the pump outside—gingerly, avoiding the blisters on his hands—he peered into his backpack, still slumped on the front porch. None of the snacks he'd brought from his old apartment felt adequate for his first breakfast on the farm, so he pulled the pack onto his sore shoulders and set out on foot towards where he thought the town was.

Now that productivity and a good night's sleep had chased away a little of the existential crisis, it was quite lovely here, really. The stretch of road between his farm and the town was flat and lined with shady trees, and the breeze felt wonderful on his face. He crunched along through the gravel for half an hour, letting his thoughts wander. He didn't meet another soul on the road, and wasn't sure whether that was a relief or not. The solitude was a nice change from Zuzu City, but he was beginning to feel a little lonely. He wondered what the townspeople were like. Would they be excited for some new blood in town, or suspicious of outsiders? Would there be anyone near his own age? He'd more or less put aside the idea of

finding any romantic partners; it was a small town, after all, and he wasn't sure how open-minded they would be. Still, he hoped he could make some friends.

Eventually, more sunlight began spilling down the path ahead, and the trees opened up to a cobblestoned square. A handful of buildings dotted the edges: a store, what looked like a clinic, and *aha*— a saloon. He only hoped it would be open so early, and that any nearby townsfolk wouldn't assume he was a lush. Crossing the square, he pushed open the saloon's heavy wooden door. His relief at finding it open was short-lived, though; there was no one in sight. He stepped inside, peering behind the bar and down a corridor leading to what looked like a storage room, but the place looked deserted.

"Hello?" he called, but there was no answer. Feeling it was a bit premature to go snooping around the back rooms, Charlie left the building. His stomach gave a rumble of protest. Maybe the store would be open? He didn't have a kitchen, but if he could even find some bread or fruit or something...He crossed to the shop's door, but no luck. The posted schedule declared it wouldn't open for another hour.

"Need some help?" asked a voice behind him, and he nearly jumped out of his skin. Turning around, he saw a small young woman in a nurse's uniform, dark eyes peering at him curiously from behind her glasses. She stood in the doorway of the clinic, propping it open with her hip. Charlie shook off his embarrassment at how badly he'd startled, and walked forward with his hand outstretched.

"I think so, actually," he said, with a rueful smile. "I'm Charlie, I'm new in town. Just moved onto the old farm out west?"

"Oh, the new farmer!" the young woman exclaimed, shaking his hand with enthusiasm. "It's so nice to meet you. Everyone's been talking about it for weeks."

"What, really?"

"Afraid so," she replied conspiratorially. "We don't get many newcomers around here. I think Shane was the last one, and...well." She gave a lopsided shrug that Charlie wasn't sure how to interpret. "I'm Maru. I live up in the mountains with my parents, but I work here at the clinic."

"Great to meet you." Charlie glanced back over at the saloon, stomach still growling. "Hey, weird question. I just went into the saloon—I can't remember what it's called, that one over —"

"The Stardrop," Maru interrupted, with a little grin. "Don't worry, there's just the one."

"Right, of course. Well, anyway. I went in, but there was nobody there! Door was unlocked and everything. Do you think something's wrong, or…?"

Maru smiled again, shaking her head. "Nah, no problems, Gus is just in here for his checkup. He should be done any minute, he was the first appointment of the day."

"And he just...left the door unlocked?"

“Oh, yeah. Not many locked doors around here.” She laughed and stood aside, holding the door open. “You’ll get used to it. Want to come in and wait? You can meet Gus and Harvey.”

“Oh, I don’t want to be a bother—”

“I’ve got coffee,” she added, and Charlie filed inside behind her.

* * * * *

“You sure I can’t convince you to come by the Stardrop tonight, doc?” Gus asked, squeezing through the exam room door as Harvey held it open. “Just got a few new wines in. On the house.”

Harvey gave a noncommittal hum as he followed him down the corridor toward the waiting room. “Thanks, Gus. Maybe this weekend.” As they neared the end of the hall, Harvey heard Maru laughing—but was surprised to hear an unfamiliar voice laughing with her. He didn’t think there were any unfamiliar voices *left* in Pelican Town.

“And then,” the voice was saying, “he just walked off and left me with these parsnip seeds, and it all hit me, like—I have *no idea* how to grow anything!”

“You’ve never even *gardened* before?” Maru gasped, mid-laugh. “You dropped everything and moved here without even knowing how *seeds* work?”

“I guess I thought, how hard can it be?”

Gus pushed through the waiting room door ahead of Harvey, booming out a “Why, hello there!” in his baritone voice. As Harvey rounded the doorframe, he stopped dead in his tracks, and didn’t hear the newcomer’s reply over the sudden pounding of his heart. Standing against the counter, laughing with Maru as though they’d been friends for years, was a man he’d never seen before. He wore a broad smile on his slightly sunburned face, and Harvey thought he could make out a dusting of freckles beneath the pink. A shock of messy auburn curls spilled over his warm brown eyes. Harvey lost track of how long he stood there, staring like an idiot, but in his defense he hadn’t expected to see a gloriously beautiful stranger standing in his office at eight in the morning.

“Um,” Maru said, jolting him out of his reverie, and he realized that Gus and the stranger had stopped talking. Everyone was looking at him expectantly, as though he’d been asked a question and been too busy gawking to notice. Fortunately, Maru rolled her eyes and took the situation in hand. “This is Harvey, the town doctor. He does speak, occasionally. Harvey, this is that new farmer Mayor Lewis mentioned.”

The newcomer smiled at him, a little tentatively, and came forward to offer a handshake. “Charlie. Nice to meet you, Harvey.”

“Yes, you too!” Harvey responded, in a bizarrely cheerful voice that sounded nothing like his own. Both Maru and Gus glanced at him curiously. He cleared his throat and shook Charlie’s hand, hoping his face wasn’t as red as he thought it was. In the back of his mind, his doctor voice pointed out the blisters he could feel on Charlie’s palm, but he pushed it aside; a bit

early to be offering unsolicited medical advice. “It’s nice to meet you, too. Sorry. I haven’t, uh, had any coffee yet this morning.”

Charlie picked up a mug on the counter, gesturing with it. “Just finished mine,” he said. “Maru’s a lifesaver. Now if I could just find some breakfast, I’d be all set.” At this, Gus clapped him on the shoulder as though they were old friends.

“I can help with that, farmer Charlie!” he declared, and began steering Charlie toward the door. “On the house, I insist. Nobody moves to *my* village and pays for their first meal.” Charlie looked slightly startled by this outburst, but threw a smile over his shoulder at Maru and Harvey as he was towed along in Gus’s wake.

“Thanks again for the coffee, Maru! See you soon. You too, Doctor Harvey.” The bell on the door jingled as it swept shut behind them, and Harvey stood in a daze, feeling as though a small tornado had just swept through.

“Wow,” Maru said, and Harvey snapped out of it; she was smirking at him in a way that couldn’t bode well. “I never thought I’d see the day.”

“What are you talking about?” Harvey asked defensively, making a beeline for the coffee pot.

“You should have seen your face, doc. Might as well have had cartoon hearts in your eyes.”

“That’s ridi—”

“You’ll be doodling your initials together on your prescription pad before the week is out.”

“Maru!”

“I mean, it’s understandable. He *was* pretty.”

“He wasn’t—I wasn’t—”

“Maybe try a little harder to *talk* to him next time, though.”

“You are fired,” Harvey hissed, retreating through the swinging door to the back of the clinic. Maru laughed as she swiveled back to face the counter.

“Whatever you say, boss,” she called, and began filing her paperwork for the day.

Chapter 2: Spring, Year 1

Chapter Summary

> Three visitors arrive at the farm, and only two of them leave. Harvey visits the Stardrop. Charlie makes a friend, whether the friend likes it or not.

Chapter Notes

> One more for today, to get things started!

Eventually, Charlie had learned to work through the soreness in his muscles. If he was going to last one season, he couldn't spend every other day lazing around and waiting for his body to catch up. Fortunately, he'd returned to the clinic to visit Maru on his fourth day in town, and she'd been happy to send him home with some over-the-counter painkillers. He'd thought he might see Harvey as well, but the doctor hadn't made an appearance; maybe he was with a patient? It was the strangest thing, though. Once, during their conversation, Charlie could have sworn he'd seen a movement behind the swinging door, but when he'd turned to look more closely, it was gone. Maybe he was exhausted enough to be seeing things.

With a lot of effort, he'd managed to clear the area directly in front of his house of weeds, rocks, and fallen branches. He'd even chopped down two trees and stacked them for firewood, a feat that made him feel like Paul fuckin' Bunyan, rather than a soft and pasty cubicle jockey. He had gotten those parsnip seeds into the ground, and optimistically, had bought and planted some more. Nothing had happened yet, but these things took time...he thought? He watered them every day, practically lying down on the ground to scrutinize the patch of soil at eye level. Did it look like there was a little bump there? Could something be sprouting? So far, all he had to show for his obsessive monitoring were grass stains on his shirt.

A week after he'd come to Stardew Valley, he padded outside in the morning and blearily checked the mail. There was a note from Lewis informing him that next week there would be an egg festival— *weird thing to make a festival around, but OK*— and a note from Robin reminding him that she could make improvements to his house.

"Robin, I live in a literal shack," he sighed aloud. "Believe me, when I can afford some improvements, you'll be the *first* to know."

He turned around, wondering if he could get away with returning to bed for a bit—but then, suddenly, he felt wide awake. He practically flew to the edge of the parsnip patch, dropping to his knees and flinging the mail behind him. Peeking up from the soil, fragile-looking and tiny but unmistakably *there,* were dozens of parsnip seedlings.

The relief that flooded Charlie's veins was so intense, he felt dizzy. He leapt to his feet, both fists thrust into the air like a prizefighter. "YES!" he shouted, to no one in particular. "I'm not gonna starve!"

"Oh, I'm glad to hear that!" called a singsong female voice, and Charlie nearly fell over. Would the women in this town ever start announcing themselves? Striding up the fields from the south, picking her way through the weeds, was his neighbor Marnie. She was a friendly and helpful woman, if just a touch nosy. She had already reassured him twice that his plants would grow if he just kept watering them, and both times, had insisted he stay for lunch (an offer he didn't really have the ability to politely refuse, given his lack of a kitchen and empty bank account). She was kind to her animals, and Charlie was grateful to have her as a neighbor. As he shielded his eyes to squint at her, though, he saw she wasn't alone. A sullen-looking, black-haired man trailed behind her, and there was something in her arms... *squirming?*

"Charlie, this is my nephew Shane," she said, a little breathlessly, as she pulled up beside him. "He moved to town a few months back, and I thought you two should meet." Charlie glanced at the man, who was now staring determinedly at the ground, but he was distracted by what Marnie carried.

"I hate to break it to you, Marn, but your nephew looks an awful lot like a dog," he said, and Marnie burst into giggles. She turned toward Charlie more fully, and a little face peeked out from under her arm, and Charlie felt his heart melt into his shoes. The face belonged to a gangly brown puppy, shiny brown eyes gazing at him solemnly above a wet black nose. The pup's ears were freckled and flopped forward onto his forehead; he strained toward Charlie, snuffling.

"Found this little fella curled up in my barn," she announced, hoisting him more securely into her arms. "Not sure where he came from, but he was all alone, and I'm afraid I've got more than enough mouths to feed." She grinned at Charlie, holding the puppy out toward him. *"You,* though, you're all alone up here. You need some company, and a farm needs a dog. What do you say?"

Charlie looked up from scratching the puppy's flopped ear, startled. "What?"

"Will you take him?" she pressed. "He needs a good home, and you seem like a dog person."

"Puppies are a lot of work, Marnie," he stammered, holding his hands up as though surrendering. "They need tons of supervision."

"Sure do."

"I'm working on getting the farm established right now, and I can't really afford to get distracted, you know?"

“Yep.”

“I’ve just gotten some crops going, and that’s not really a good scene for a puppy. He could trample everything. I’d have to build fences, and I just don’t have time.”

“Of course not.” Marnie smiled serenely, as though it made no difference to her, and turned to leave. “I’ll go shop him around town. Maybe somebody else’ll take him in. Don’t worry about him at all.” As she and Shane walked away, the puppy poked his head around her shoulder, looked straight into Charlie’s eyes, and whined.

Shit. “On second thought,” Charlie called, and as he jogged forward to claim his dog, he pretended he didn’t notice Marnie’s smug grin.

* * * * *

Harvey didn’t visit the saloon often, but occasionally, the silence of his apartment became too much even for him. He found that spending an evening in the same room as a lot of other people was enough to cure him of his acute loneliness for a while, even if he didn’t really interact with them. As he pushed the door open on Friday night, though, the energy of the place felt different. The reason was immediately apparent: Charlie the farmer was sitting at the bar.

For one moment of insanity, Harvey actually considered walking up and sitting beside him. He imagined a scenario in which he ordered a drink, pretended to be surprised by Charlie’s presence, and then they chatted amiably for the next hour or so. He was capable of having a totally normal social interaction with someone, wasn’t he? Even if that someone was a handsome stranger he’d been hiding from for days, and who was now deep in conversation with Emily?

The idea dissipated as quickly as it had come, and Harvey shuffled to the far end of the bar, wedging himself as deep into the corner as he could get. Gus brought him a glass of red wine without even asking, which he gratefully accepted. From his vantage point, he had a good view of Charlie, and he took advantage of the farmer’s distraction to just watch him for a bit. Charlie’s sunburn had deepened and begun to fade into a tan (Harvey made a mental note to talk to him about sun protection when he came in for a checkup). Some of his hairs had lightened, the auburn now woven through with gold. He talked with his hands, and Harvey saw that they were still blistered; the transition to farm life must be a physically demanding one, he thought sympathetically. Something about his posture was different, though; he looked more confident, more sure of himself. And Emily leaned in close and laughed with him as though they shared some kind of inside joke.

In short, Charlie appeared to be settling in better than Harvey had in six years of living in Pelican Town. Harvey sighed into his wine. Of course, the first person he’d been attracted to in years *would* be an effortlessly gregarious type. There was no way someone like that would want to talk to Harvey about jazz, or books, or aviation. Just like with everyone else, Harvey would exist to him only as the quiet town doctor. He drained the rest of his wine, and uncharacteristically ordered another. This was going to be at least a two-glass night.

Charlie got up from the bar, and Harvey felt a pang of disappointment; was he leaving already? But then, Charlie leaned forward to retrieve *two* beers Emily had set before him. A wild, silly hope fluttered in Harvey's chest. Was it possible Charlie had noticed him, and seen he'd finished his drink? There was no way, of course...but was there?

Charlie crossed the room to the booths along the far wall, set the beers down on a table, and dropped into the booth...across from Shane. The tiny hope in Harvey's chest died away, leaving the more familiar disappointment in its wake. Charlie smiled at Shane, pushing one of the beers across the table to him, and Harvey looked away. Behind the bar, Gus had cut the foil off a fresh bottle of wine, and was just beginning to insert the corkscrew.

"Hold that thought, Gus," Harvey called, and Gus looked up at him curiously. "Actually, can I just take the bottle? To go?"

* * * * *

"So what's Shane's deal?" Charlie asked Emily, trying to surreptitiously jerk his head in the man's direction. Shane was seated alone in a corner booth, nursing a beer and picking at what was left of a pizza. "He stopped by with Marnie the other day but he didn't say a word. I'm getting the feeling he doesn't like me."

"He doesn't like many people," Emily replied, eyes on the glass she was drying. "He was like that with me at first, but he's nicer now. It might just be because I bring him his beer and food," she added, winking. "He's actually a good guy, I think he's just depressed, maybe."

"Do you know why he lives with Marnie?"

"Not really. Why don't you ask him?" She placed two glasses on the countertop and filled both with the beer Charlie had been drinking. "If you can get him to stay and talk to you until his beer is gone, those are on me. He won't make it easy, though."

Charlie smirked, standing with the beers. "You're on."

He crossed the bar to Shane's table, and he could see the moment when Shane realized his trajectory would carry Charlie to the booth; instantly, his posture went wary, hunching further over his beer and tugging at the cuffs of his hoodie. Charlie had a moment of hesitation; maybe Shane really did just want to be left alone? He glanced back at Emily, who gave him an encouraging little *go on!* gesture.

"Hey, Shane, wasn't it?" he asked as he approached the table, trying to look as inoffensive as possible. "Not sure if you remember me, I'm your neighbor up north. Charlie."

"I remember," Shane grunted, not looking at him. Charlie hovered awkwardly for a moment, but Shane seemed to have nothing more to say.

"Mind if I sit down for a minute?" he asked, and that got Shane's attention. The man squinted at him, and privately Charlie thought he looked like hell. His eyes were bloodshot over dark purple circles, his skin was a little blotchy, and he clearly hadn't shaved in a few days. His hoodie was threadbare and looked none too clean, and the T-shirt under it looked possibly

worse. In spite of all of this, he was actually pretty handsome—one of those unfair types who seemed to look better the less they tried. Shane scowled, looking around the whole bar before finally making eye contact with Charlie.

“Why,” he said flatly. “There’s like 50 tables open.”

“Yeah, but I accidentally have two beers, and I hate drinking alone,” Charlie replied, trying a tentative smile. Shane rolled his eyes.

“Accidentally, sure. Emily definitely didn’t send you over here with an extra so you’d try to make friends.”

He hadn’t actually said no, so Charlie slid into the seat across from him, depositing the beers on the table. “Why would she do a thing like that, do you think?”

Shane shrugged, shooting the blue-haired bartender a glare. “She worries about me. Always trying to get me to talk to people.”

“Why is she so concerned?”

“She thinks we’re friends.”

“But you don’t?”

“I don’t do the whole ‘friends’ thing,” Shane said, with an air of finality. He ignored the beer Charlie had brought him, swirling the last suds around his old glass instead. Charlie took a drink of his own. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Harvey walking out the door with a bottle of wine. He hadn’t even realized the doctor was in the bar; too bad, he’d have liked to say hi.

“I’ve been known to do the ‘friends’ thing occasionally,” Charlie said at last. Shane looked up at him from beneath his eyebrows, then glanced away.

“You wouldn’t want to be friends with me.”

“Why not?”

“Well, for starters I’m an asshole. And a failure.”

“Oh, that’s a relief,” Charlie said, and Shane looked up in surprise. “I’m a recovering failure myself, you know. It’d be pretty intimidating if you were some massive success story.”

Shane snorted—apparently, Charlie had managed to catch him off guard. At last, he reached across the table and took the beer Charlie had brought him. Charlie tried not to let his glee show on his face; he got the sense that Shane could be spooked like a horse at any given moment.

“Why’d you move to this podunk town anyway?” Shane asked suddenly. His tone was aggressive, but Charlie decided to ignore it. Getting him to ask anything at all was a good enough first step.

“I’ll tell you mine if you tell me yours.”

“Forget it.” Shane took a long drink of his beer, avoiding Charlie’s eyes.

Charlie sighed. “I used to work for Joja,” he said, and Shane looked *very* surprised at that—why? “Couldn’t stand it, and my grandpa had left me this place. So I moved.”

Shane blinked, apparently forgetting to be annoyed with Charlie for a moment. “I work at JojaMart,” he said. “I can see why you’d drop everything to get out of that shithole.”

“I figured you worked on Marnie’s ranch.”

Shane gave a half-shake of his head. “Nah. I mean, a little bit. I help out with the chickens some. But Marnie can’t afford to pay me. I…” He visibly hesitated, and Charlie thought privately that maybe they were finally getting somewhere. “I feel bad enough taking up space in her house. Had to get a real job so I wouldn’t be *totally* worthless. If you can call that a real job.”

Charlie gave him a moment, wondering if he should even ask, since Shane had shied away last time. He really did want to know, though. “Why’d you move in with Marnie, then? Where were you before?”

“In Zuzu,” Shane answered, fiddling with his sleeves again. “Made some bad choices.”

He didn’t seem inclined to elaborate further, and Charlie decided not to push the subject. They’d made a lot of progress for one beer. He and Shane finished their drinks at the same time, and Shane pulled up his hood.

“Been here too long. I better get going.” He stood, then paused beside the table. “Don’t get any ideas, farm boy. We’re not friends.”

“Wouldn’t dream of it,” Charlie replied airily, and Shane stalked off with another snort. Once the door closed, Charlie and Emily grinned at each other. He’d earned his free beers, fair and square. More importantly, in spite of what Shane said, he thought he might’ve just made a new friend.

Chapter 3: Spring, Year 1

Chapter Summary

A gift is given, appreciated, and contemplated. Marnie flexes her persuasive skills again. A chicken is named, badly. An accident occurs, Harvey goes into Doctor Mode, and a drink is bought in thanks.

Chapter Notes

A quick warning: this chapter contains the first medical situation of our story. There's a little blood, and an animal in distress/with an injury. Spoiler alert: it's minor and the animal in question is going to be 100% fine, but just be aware it's coming if you're sensitive to that kind of thing. (I am!)

The weeks passed quickly. Charlie's days were full from the moment he woke up until the moment he fell, exhausted, into bed. More often than not, he didn't even bother changing into pajamas, just tore off his sweaty work clothes and collapsed on top of the covers. He seemed to have gotten the hang of growing crops—he'd even harvested parsnips twice!—and while his income was still pitifully small, it *existed,* and that was a relief in and of itself.

Charlie had fallen into a sort of routine, where he spent all morning watering and weeding, chipped away at the weed-and-rock-infested fields over the midday hours, did some work on a well he was trying to dig toward the western boundary, and then wandered into town for the afternoon. In the evening when it was cooler, he returned to work the fields some more, but he had come to really look forward to his afternoon breaks in town. The puppy refused to be left behind, trailing after him and whining, and so nowadays he generally ran along behind Charlie. He couldn't believe how much the dog had grown in just a few short weeks; his limbs were long and gangly, his paws unmanageably big. One ear had taken to standing up, but the other still flopped over. Charlie had named him Bones, a nod to his youthful evenings spent watching *Star Trek.*

On one day toward the end of spring, Charlie had an extra skip in his step. A few of his acquaintances in town were beginning to grow into friendships, and he was excited to bring some gifts to the villagers. As usual, he stopped by the clinic first, taking a moment to order Bones to stay outside. The puppy bounded across the square to chase some butterflies, and Charlie pushed inside. It was always heavenly when he first walked in—he didn't have air-conditioning anywhere on his farm, and it was a luxury he savored on these visits. Maru brightened when she saw him, standing up to lean on the counter.

“Charlie!” she called as he crossed the room. “How’s it going? Have you gotten that new coop in the works yet?”

“Gonna drop off the wood with your mom this afternoon,” Charlie said, a little pride seeping into his voice. He’d been felling trees and stacking wood for what felt like months, counting the pieces with increasing impatience, and he finally had enough. The money was another story, but what was one more loan, in the scheme of things?

“That’s great. She’ll be so excited, she’s been dying to build something for you.”

“I think she’s probably been dying to fix my woodpile of a house, but one thing at a time,” Charlie replied, smirking. As Maru laughed, the door to the exam area swung open, and Harvey stepped out, his nose in his paperwork.

“Maru,” he said absently, heading for the coffee pot, “will you please order some—” He glanced up just then, apparently noticing Charlie for the first time, and stopped mid-sentence. Charlie wondered if he was always this shy around people; it seemed like it would be tricky to maintain a good bedside manner with social anxiety. He smiled in what he hoped was an encouraging way.

“Hi, Harvey,” he said. “Haven’t seen you around much! Have things been busy here?”

“Um, yes, busy,” Harvey replied, straightening his glasses.

“Actually, it’s been really slow,” Maru said, and for some reason Harvey shot her a disgruntled glare.

“Thank you, *Maru.* She’s right, there aren’t many patients this time of year, but it’s a good time to get everything straightened up from the winter rush. Lots of cleaning, paperwork, you know how it is.”

“Not really, but I’ll take your word for it,” Charlie said cheerfully. He hoisted his basket onto the counter, gesturing grandly. “Almost forgot why I came in. Check it out, guys! I actually grew stuff!”

“Oh, wow!” Maru exclaimed, leaning forward to look through its contents. “This all looks great, Charlie. Looks like you figured the farming thing out!”

“I’m working on it,” he grinned. “As the first friends I made in town, I wanted you guys to have the first goodies. Here.” He reached into the basket and pulled out a large cauliflower—his best one yet, actually—and handed it over to Maru, who looked far more excited than most people would after receiving a bland white vegetable as a gift.

“Thanks, Charlie! I love these. How’d you know?”

“Your mom was feeling chatty,” he said. “And for you, Harvey...here you go. I’ve never made them before, so let me know if they aren’t good. You won’t hurt my feelings. Much, anyway.” He held out his first-ever jar of pickled parsnips, feeling inordinately proud of

himself. Maru had mentioned the doctor's love of sour things, and judging by the incredulous look on Harvey's face, she'd either been totally right or totally wrong.

"For me?" Harvey repeated, blinking down at the jar. "You made me these?"

"Sure did. Don't feel like you have to eat them if they're not your thing, though—"

"No!" Harvey blurted, finally taking it from Charlie's hands. He smiled broadly, and Charlie was struck by how it transformed his face—suddenly he looked rather handsome and *young*. Genuine pleasure made him a totally new man. "These are my favorite thing, honestly. It's like you read my mind. Thank you."

Charlie mirrored Harvey's smile with his own, feeling warmed to his core. It felt great to give the shy, reclusive doctor something he really liked; he mentally resolved to do it more often. Few of the villagers had been able to tell Charlie much about Harvey, which struck him as sad. He'd obviously been here for some time—surely he had more friends than just Maru? If not, maybe Charlie could help solve that problem.

"You know, Charlie," Maru was saying, jolting Charlie back to the present, "this cauliflower looks great, but there is a little bit of mechanical damage on the stem. I think you might have a slug problem. If you want, I can show you how to fix that."

Charlie groaned, leaning in close to look. "Maru, what would I do without you?"

"Die, probably," she said with a wink. "Now, first you need some shallow dishes, like lids, lids are perfect…"

As she spoke, Charlie heard the exam area door swing shut, and he looked up to see that Harvey had left. Beyond the little window, though, he could just make out the doctor—pausing in the hallway to look down at the jar in his hands. Charlie smiled.

Pickles, huh.

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One of these times, Harvey was going to talk to him. He *was*. It just always seemed to catch him off guard, how good-looking Charlie was. He'd think he was becoming used to it, the hammering behind his ribs subsiding a little, and then Charlie would send his heart back into overdrive just by giving him a smile. Or a jar of *pickles,* Yoba help him. What kind of bizarre turn had his life taken, that the man of his dreams had just waltzed in out of nowhere and delivered him his favorite food? His favorite *homemade* food, he added mentally, and nearly swooned. Maru was right, he really *was* a lost cause.

Safely installed in his apartment for the night, Harvey settled onto the couch and opened the jar of pickles. He pulled a parsnip from the brine, inspecting it. *Charlie made this. Charlie* grew *this.* The pickle gave a satisfying crunch as he took a bite, and he chewed with his eyes closed, wanting to savor it. It...wasn't the best pickle he'd ever had, to be honest. What had seemed like a nice zippy crunch at first bite was actually proving to be a pretty hard texture as he chewed, and Charlie had been a little too aggressive with the salt. Harvey couldn't

really taste the parsnip underneath at all. Still, it was a pickle, and not a *bad* first effort. Plus, Harvey kept seeing the mental image as he ate: Charlie working out in the fields, the sun beating down on him as he watered and harvested. Charlie scrubbing parsnips and submerging them in brine. Charlie nestling the pickles into a jar, thinking of Harvey, wanting to bring him a gift. His cheeks turning pink at the thought, Harvey ate another too-crunchy pickle.

He let himself replay Charlie's afternoon visit in his mind. The way he'd smiled at him after Harvey had thanked him for the pickles—really looking at him, really *seeing* him. Harvey had wondered if he'd been too effusive with his thanks, but Charlie's reaction had been nothing but pleased. He wondered what he could do to see that look on the farmer's face again. Could he give *Charlie* a gift? It was polite to welcome new neighbors, right? The problem was, he didn't really know what Charlie's interests were, beyond farming and having dogs foisted upon him by neighbors. Maybe Maru did; they had a little chat almost every day. Harvey tried not to dwell on the reasons for this too much. Maru was funny and brilliant, excellent company for anyone. It was possible Charlie hadn't even noticed her lovely smile and gleaming dark eyes.

Harvey shook himself, putting the lid back on the pickle jar before he could absently demolish the whole thing. He had no right to even speculate about Charlie's relationships; it certainly wasn't as though Harvey had any claim over him, or ever would. Harvey didn't even know if he liked *men* —though he privately thought they'd all find out soon enough, judging by the way some of the folks in town gossiped and schemed over him. No, he thought, putting the pickles in the refrigerator on the way to his desk, he needed to rein himself in before his little crush got out of hand. He hadn't been interested in anyone since—well, *him,* he wasn't going to even think his name—and it had kept his life blessedly uncomplicated. So what if he was lonely? A new friend could be just what he needed; he didn't have to go wishing for anything more. Even if that friend had beautiful eyes and a smile that lit the room. He'd get over that eventually. Definitely. Probably.

In the meantime, he had other people to talk to...or try. He slipped his headphones on, reaching for the knob on his radio, and settled into his familiar evening routine. "Dr. H at 52 North, 43.5 East, seeking aerial response. Anyone out there?"

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The walk to Marnie's ranch from the farm had never seemed longer, even when the entire field had been choked by weeds and boulders—but then, Charlie had never been more excited to pay her a visit. Bones was excited too, although Charlie doubted he knew why; he was just excited that someone *else* was excited. The dog bounced along in his wake, taking occasional detours to snap at a bug or follow an especially good sniff, while Charlie checked the cash in his pocket for the hundredth time. As he finally rounded the gap in the cliffs that led to Marnie's ranch, he put on a burst of speed, praying no one was outside to notice how ridiculous he looked.

Marnie looked up, startled, as he burst through the door. "Well! What's got you so worked up, neighbor?"

“Chickens!” Charlie burst out, grinning from ear to ear. “Robin finished up the coop, Marnie! I’m ready to get it loaded up.” He leaned on the counter, feeling like a kid about to bring home a new pet. He couldn’t say why, but something about the idea of having livestock made him feel like a *real farmer.* Any idiot could grow parsnips, you could do it in a pot in your house, but raising animals was another story. The image of a little flock of chickens pecking around their coop—it was idyllic as hell, and Charlie couldn’t wait.

Neither could Marnie, apparently. She clapped her hands together, delighted. “That’s wonderful! I’ve actually just got a brand new brood of chicks, real cuties. How many were you thinking?”

Charlie was proud of himself; he’d thought about this. Obviously just one chick would be lonely. “Two, please.” But apparently, that had been the wrong answer; Marnie’s face went mock-stern, and she shook her head decisively.

“Two? No, no, that won’t do.”

“You sound like a Dr. Seuss book, just so you know.”

“It’s harder to introduce new chickens to the flock later, city boy. You should start with at least four if you’re going into egg production.”

“Four!” Charlie repeated, feeling overwhelmed already. “Marnie, I’ve never raised a chicken in my life. I think it’s a bit of a leap to *four.”*

“Not at all. Four’s not any harder than one. I’ll go get them ready.”

He followed her to the coop, all his protests—that he couldn’t afford four chickens yet, that he didn’t know how he was going to carry them home, that he’d wanted to start small—being waved away, and he knew in his heart it was a losing battle. Just like with Bones, Marnie had decided what was best for Charlie, and he was powerless to refuse. He eyed her thoughtfully as she pushed through the coop door; at about five-three, with a stocky frame and a thick braid over her shoulder, she seemed an unlikely person to be such a force of nature. And yet, here he was, obediently holding the box as she selected her four best-looking chicks for him. As she settled the last peeping, kicking fluffball into the box (Charlie’s heart squeezed a little, he’d always been a sucker for a cute animal), she paused with a calculating look.

“That’s almost the whole flock,” she said. “Only two little guys left. It’ll be pretty lonely for them, won’t it? Poor babies.” She gave a businesslike sigh. “Oh well. That’s farm life. Let’s go get your other supplies.”

And that was how Charlie found himself cradling a box filled with *six* chicks, bouncing along in the passenger seat of Marnie’s ancient truck and thinking she should really teach business classes. She’d offered to drive Charlie home with his new babies—they weren’t exactly heavy, but their feed and the heat lamp she’d loaned him were a different story—but he’d spotted Shane emerging from his bedroom, and quickly asked for his help.

“I don’t want to keep you from your animals too long, Marnie,” he’d explained hastily. “Shane can help me get them set up, if he doesn’t mind? You said you helped with the

chickens," he added to Shane, who'd grumbled mutinously but began pulling on his shoes.

"Don't let him fool you. He *loves* chickens," Marnie had stage-whispered, earning an eye roll from Shane.

"Let's go, then," Shane had said, and pushed outside with a yipping Bones at his heels.

The ride was short and spent mostly in silence, punctuated by Charlie's coos at the babies in his lap and the truck's loud bangs as it navigated the uneven ground. Bones was having the time of his life in the truck bed, ears flapping in the wind. "Thanks for coming," Charlie said loudly over the din of the engine. "I was afraid if she drove me here I'd own a cow or five by the time I got home, and I don't have a barn yet."

Shane snorted, killing the engine as they pulled up to the coop. "That's Marnie," was all he said. He hopped out and began unloading feed while Bones tore away after a squirrel. Charlie carefully walked the box of chicks into the coop; they just seemed so *fragile,* he was almost afraid to put them down. Would they really be okay without their mother?

"They're more resilient than they look," Shane grunted, reading his mind. "Just keep the heat on and don't forget to feed them, and they'll be fine."

"Maybe you could come check on them once in a while?" Charlie suggested. "They seem to like you." It wasn't even flattery; the moment Charlie had let them out of the box, they'd rushed to surround Shane's feet, peeping riotously. Shane shrugged, though there was a tug at the corner of his mouth that suggested he was pleased.

"They just know me," he said dismissively. "I've been hanging out with them a little."

"Probably important to socialize them, huh?" One of the more adventurous chicks had wandered away from Shane's sneaker, taking tentative steps toward Charlie. He tried to stay as still as possible, not rising from his crouch.

"They're better company than people."

"Oh yeah? How's that?"

"Well, they don't *talk* so fucking much, for one thing," Shane said acidly, but when Charlie looked at him there was a little humor in his eyes. Charlie smirked, turning his attention back to the chick, who was now perched on the toe of his boot.

"I can start clucking instead, if you want."

"That's all I hear when you talk anyway, farm boy."

That was the second time Shane had called him that; it sounded vaguely insulting, but Charlie thought it might be kind of a term of endearment, the way some people called their friends *butthole* or *assface.* It felt like progress, maybe? Hard to tell with Shane, but he hadn't refused to come, so that was something. Charlie found him surprisingly easy to talk to; he appreciated the sweetness and exuberance of the other townsfolk, but Shane's sarcasm was a nice contrast sometimes.

They discussed the care of chickens for a while, mostly Charlie peppering Shane with questions while Shane gave yes or no answers, and Charlie progressed to carefully holding the one who'd perched on his boot. He held it up to eye level, squinting as he gently turned it upside down.

"Stupid question," he began.

"As opposed to…?"

"How can you tell if it's a boy or a girl?" He couldn't see anything under all that fluff, and it seemed rude to start molesting the chicks in search of...what kind of parts did chickens even *have,* anyway? God, he was a bad farmer.

"You can't, yet. You'll know when they grow up. It's luck of the draw."

"Oh." Somehow Charlie had never imagined a rooster as part of his Fantasy Farm Life roster, but he supposed waking up to a crow at dawn had its charms. He turned the chick back over, where it resumed pecking lightly at his hand. "Hey, do you want to name this one? Since you helped me get them settled?"

Shane threw it a glance over the heat lamp he was installing, then turned back to his work. "I'm shit at naming things."

"Have you met my dog? His name is Bones."

Shane laughed a little at that, wiping his hands on his jeans. "You've got a point."

"So…?"

"Pizza."

Charlie blinked. "What? Are you hungry?"

"No, a name for your chicken. Pizza."

"Um."

"You said I could name it," Shane insisted, edging into defensive territory, and Charlie gave up.

"You're right. Pizza it is." He held the chick at arm's length like baby Simba in *The Lion King,* feeling the need to somehow mark the occasion of its naming. It didn't seem to object to being named after a junk food, particularly. At least it wasn't Buffalo Wings or something like that.

Although, now that he thought about it, Buffalo was kind of a cute name?

The momentary pause in conversation was cut short by a horrible noise from outside, a gut-wrenching yelp that plummeted Charlie's stomach straight into his shoes. *"Bones!"* he shouted, barely remembering to set the chick down gently before he barreled out of the coop.

He heard Shane running after him, right on his heels, as he frantically searched the field. He called Bones' name over and over again, increasingly desperate. What had happened to him? There weren't any dangerous animals here, what could have—

"Found him!" Shane shouted from somewhere to his right, and Charlie immediately tore off in his direction. Shane was crouching down, peering at something, and Charlie's heart stopped for a moment. The well, the fucking *well,* he hadn't thought—

"He's moving, Charlie, he's okay," Shane was saying, but Charlie could barely hear him. The pit he'd been digging to eventually turn into a well was mercifully not very deep yet, but still a long distance for a puppy to fall, almost eight feet. Charlie didn't even stop to spare a glance in before he bolted down the ladder, dropping the last few feet to land in the cool dirt beside Bones. The puppy gave a whimper and stirred pitifully, and the sound cut through Charlie like a knife.

"I know, buddy, I know, I'm sorry," he murmured fretfully, kneeling to take a look at him. He actually seemed mostly okay—he was trying to get to his feet, straining his neck toward Charlie's face to lick it—but something was wrong with his back leg; he wasn't moving it, and when Charlie gently touched it, his hand came away covered in blood. A gash several inches long was open just above the knee, and squinting upward, Charlie saw a sharp, bloody rock protruding from the side of the well. Bones must have slid past it on his way down.

Another sharp whine from Bones brought him back to the present situation, and he slid his hands under the puppy's warm side, intending to pick him up. The moment he exerted any pressure, though, Bones cried out in pain. He settled him back down, making soothing little noises and thinking hard.

"Shane?" he called up, and saw that Shane already had one foot on the top rung of the ladder.

"Need help getting him out?"

Charlie shook his head. "I'm afraid to move him. I think he really hurt his leg. Is there a vet anywhere nearby?"

"Nope. Marnie mostly takes care of ours, but she gets a vet to come from a couple hours away when there's big stuff."

"I don't know what to do. I think he needs stitches." An idea had popped into Charlie's head —a stupid one, but he wasn't sure he had a better option. "Can you take the truck and go get Harvey?"

Charlie had expected Shane to argue with him—Harvey was a human doctor, after all, not a vet—but to his relief Shane just stepped back from the edge of the pit, nodding. "Be right back. You should try and stop his bleeding, if you can."

Charlie called back his understanding, but the truck had already roared to life, and judging by how quickly its noise faded away, Shane was pushing it hard. He turned his attention back to Bones, who had stopped trying to reach him and laid his head on Charlie's knee, whimpering softly. When Charlie pressed his handkerchief to Bones' thigh, the puppy yelped, struggling.

“It’s okay, baby, you’re gonna be okay, I’m so sorry,” he whispered again, pulling Bones as far into his lap as he dared and rocking him gently. Pressing a kiss to his soft, dirt-streaked head, Charlie settled in for the longest wait of his life.

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Shane kept the gas pedal as close to the floor as he dared for the five-minute drive into town, hoping to cut it down to more like three minutes. Before this incident, the only variations on Charlie’s mood he’d seen ranged from “giddily happy” to “fondly exasperated,” and seeing him so shaken up had left Shane rattled. Not that he hadn’t been affected himself; Shane did love animals, and he hated seeing the poor critter in pain. But Charlie looked as though he *felt* it, as though every bump and scratch on Bones’ body had been transferred to his own.

Maybe Charlie’s soft heart was why he kept trying to befriend Shane. He certainly couldn’t think of any other reason; the town was full of nice people he could easily share a beer with. Or maybe he was a glutton for punishment. Whatever it was, he didn’t seem to care that Shane responded to his waves and greetings with nothing more than a grunt, or that they often ended up drinking their beers at the saloon in silence when Shane was in one of his black moods. He just kept on acting as though they were friends, never letting Shane drive him off, but never demanding much from him, either. Maybe that *was* friendship. Shane didn’t really know.

Enough introspection for one day, anyway. The truck screeched to a stop in front of the clinic, and Shane jumped out without bothering to stop the engine. He shoved through the front door and saw that Maru was gone, Harvey eating a sandwich at the front desk.

“Shane!” he said through a mouthful, quickly standing up and brushing crumbs from his lap. “Did you have an appointment? I didn’t think anyone was on the books today, but—”

“Emergency,” he interrupted, and Harvey’s eyebrows went up. “Need you to make a house call. Might be some stitches. Get your stuff.”

Shane had only seen Harvey in Doctor Mode once before, when he’d helped pull a nail from Robin’s hand—her nail gun had misfired as she did work on Marnie’s barn, and Marnie had gone to fetch him while Shane hovered awkwardly nearby—but it had totally transformed the man, replacing his usual timid vibe with calm confidence. It happened again now, his spine immediately straightening and his face turning businesslike.

“I’m assuming a cut. Any other injuries?” He’d grabbed a large black case from the corner and was rifling through it, checking his supplies.

“It was a fall, could be something broken. We didn’t want to move him.”

Harvey snapped the case shut and came around the counter, walking briskly. “Who’s the patient?” *Ah, shit.* Shane had been hoping to stall him until they actually arrived. He darted around to the other side of the truck, getting in and waiting for Harvey to do the same before he answered.

“It’s Charlie’s dog,” he said, pulling away from the clinic, and out of the corner of his eye he saw Harvey’s head whip around to stare at him.

“His *dog?* Shane, I’m not a veterinarian!”

“Stitches are stitches, aren’t they?” he snapped. “You’re the closest thing we’ve got, doc. Can’t wait three hours for some city vet to get their ass out here.”

Harvey looked as though he wanted to argue, but sighed in apparent resignation. “You could have told me that up front,” he muttered, finally.

“Figured it was an argument better had in the car.” Shane shifted to a higher gear and floored it down the dirt road to the farm, and Harvey grabbed at the dashboard to steady himself. Other than the noise of the truck, it was quiet for a moment. As the farmhouse came into view, Harvey spoke again.

“Is Charlie hurt?”

Something about his tone caught Shane’s attention, and Shane glanced at him across his face. Harvey was still staring fixedly through the windshield, but there was a hint of pink creeping up the back of his neck. *Interesting.* Shane filed it away under “things to ponder while drinking.”

“He’s fine,” Shane said shortly, and then amended this statement. “He’s just really upset. Dog fell into a ditch he was digging, I think he feels guilty.”

“Puppies get into all kinds of trouble,” Harvey said, and Shane grunted agreement. He took the truck all the way back to the pit, parking a few feet from the edge.

“In there,” he gestured, and Harvey hopped out with his bag, Doctor Mode back in place.

Charlie and Bones hadn’t moved much, except that Charlie had lain down beside Bones, curling himself around the puppy’s smaller form. Bones was panting hard but had otherwise gone still, no longer struggling. One of Charlie’s hands still held a blood-soaked handkerchief to the dog’s back leg. He looked up as the two men approached the edge of the pit, relief flooding his face.

“Harvey!” he called, sitting up. “God, I’m so glad you came. Can you help him?”

“I think so, but I need to take a look at him, and there’s no room for two people down there,” Harvey called back. “Can you come out?”

Charlie seemed reluctant to leave Bones, and the puppy obviously shared his feelings—the moment Charlie moved to stand up, he began whining again, trying to get to his feet. Charlie made shushing noises, trying to comfort him, and at last he slumped against the ground again, panting. Before he could get back up, Charlie scaled the ladder, emerging from the pit with suspiciously red eyes.

“He’s hurting really bad,” Charlie told Harvey, his voice unsteady. “I think he needs stitches, and he might’ve broken his leg.”

“I’ll do my best,” Harvey said gently, and seemed to want to say something more. After a moment, though, he just turned around and started down the ladder.

Charlie was clearly agonized, staring down into the pit and chewing his lower lip. Shane stood beside him, feeling useless but uncertain of how to help. Charlie still clutched the bloody handkerchief; Shane wasn't even sure he knew it was in his hand.

“Who still has hankies?” he asked, aiming for levity. Charlie looked at him blankly, and Shane indicated the bloody cloth. “Seriously, I’ve only seen those in movies.”

“Oh.” Charlie looked at it as though he’d never seen it before. “My grandpa left a bunch of them in the house. You know, it used to be just part of the whole farmer look, but I actually end up using them constantly.” He grimaced, examining the blood all over his hands. “You wouldn’t believe how dirty your hands get, messing around with crops all day.”

“Bet I would,” Shane said grimly, and looked back into the pit. Harvey was listening to the puppy’s lungs, his fingers gently working over the injured leg. Bones let out a sharp yelp, and Charlie flinched as though he’d been struck. Harvey pulled the stethoscope from his ears, hanging it around his neck one-handed.

“Nothing’s broken, he’s going to be fine,” he called up to them, and Charlie let out a deep exhale of relief. “He does need stitches, and his leg’s sprained, but it’ll heal up in a few weeks, most likely.” He stood, stretching his back. “Can you toss down a towel or a sheet? I need to wrap him to move him, make sure he doesn’t shift too much.”

A few minutes and one sprint to the farmhouse later, Harvey was passing a tightly-swaddled Bones up the ladder to Charlie, who passed him to Shane at the top. When Charlie emerged, he held a hand down to help Harvey to his feet; then, he took the bundle of puppy back from Shane, heading toward the farmhouse.

“We can use my table,” he called, and Shane and Harvey fell into step behind him. Harvey’s case thumped at his side, and he looked totally unruffled, as though he were going to an operating room to help a human patient rather than performing dog surgery on a shoddy wooden table. Shane was increasingly unsure why he, himself, was sticking around. Surely they didn’t really need him for this?

“Help me hold him, once we get inside,” Harvey said in an undertone. “He’s going to squirm, and I don’t want Charlie to have to do it.”

Shane swallowed, suddenly nervous. “All right.”

The stitching went fairly smoothly, at least to Shane’s untrained eye. Harvey numbed the area with some kind of topical gel—“I’d like to give him an injection, but I don’t know if intravenous lidocaine is safe for dogs, and anyway I don’t know the dosage”—before swabbing the wound clean and bending over the dog with his needle. As he’d predicted, Bones cried out and struggled, and Shane did his best to keep him pinned without hurting him. Charlie stroked his head and made soothing noises, his face crumpled.

“What’s his name?” Harvey asked as he worked.

“Bones.”

Harvey glanced at him with a flicker of surprise. “Bones, like the—that’s not a *Star Trek* reference, is it?”

Charlie looked up with a surprised smile, clearly delighted. “Yeah, Doctor Leonard ‘Bones’ McCoy! You’re a Trekkie?”

“I’ve seen every episode probably five times. Sometimes I wish I could get away with being as bossy to my patients as McCoy, but I don’t outrank them, sadly.”

“Could you guys wait a little while to start giving Vulcan salutes?” Shane demanded through gritted teeth. “This dog is not exactly happy to be held down.” With a hurried apology, Harvey bent back to his work, but Charlie looked much calmer than before.

After what felt like hours, Harvey tied off the last stitch, wiping his forearm across his sweaty brow. It was a warm day, and the tiny farmhouse was even hotter than the air outside. Harvey stripped off his gloves, rummaging through his case for something, and emerged with a roll of bandages.

“Just going to wrap it up so his range of motion is limited,” he explained, and Charlie nodded. The farmer ducked down close to Bones’ head, whispering something into his ear that Shane couldn’t quite make out. Wrapping the leg took far less time than the stitches, and within a minute Harvey sat back in his chair, sighing.

“All done,” he pronounced, and Charlie’s entire face smoothed out in relief. “I’ll give him something for the pain; he can take coated aspirin. He’ll still be sore for at least a couple days, so maybe keep him in the house so he can’t run around, okay?”

“Harvey, you’re the best,” Charlie said fervently, and Harvey blushed. “I don’t know what we would have done without you. I can’t thank you enough.”

“It’s fine, don’t worry about it,” Harvey insisted, waving a hand dismissively. “Glad I could help.”

“What do I owe you?”

Harvey gave a nervous laugh, and Shane noted with amusement that Doctor Mode Harvey had already disappeared—Regular Shy Harvey was back. “I don’t have a fee structure for animals, actually, so let’s just say this one’s on me.”

“No way!” Shane tuned out the rest of their bickering about payment; he didn’t give a shit whether Harvey charged the farmer or not. Instead, he ran a hand over Bones’ ears, examining the tidy wrapping around his back leg. The puppy was much calmer now, looking ready to doze off on the table. Marnie’s instincts about Charlie had been right, he supposed: the dog was lucky to have ended up here.

The argument seemed to be wrapping up. “If you *really* won’t let me pay you—”

“I *really* won’t let you pay me.”

"—then at least take some more of these." Charlie rummaged in a basket under the table and pulled out a jar of pickles. *Pickles? Seriously?* Shane thought. *What a weird way to thank someone,* but evidently Harvey didn't think so—his entire face brightened, and he reached to take them, giving Charlie a wry smile.

"Not fair," he said. "You've already figured out my weakness." Shane raised an eyebrow.

"Well, you saw mine," Charlie pointed out with a laugh, gesturing to the dog on the table. Shane's other eyebrow joined the first. Was this *flirting* he was seeing? Were these weirdos actually hitting on each other over pickles and dog surgery? Yoba, Shane had thought *he* was hopeless. He decided it was time to save them from themselves.

"I've gotta get home," he said, and both Charlie and Harvey seemed to just notice he was still there. "Doc, you want a lift back to town?"

"Oh! That would be nice," Harvey said, tucking the pickles into his case before snapping it shut. He turned to ruffle Bones' ears, and the dog thumped his tail sleepily against the table. "Charlie, just let me know if he doesn't perk back up in a few days. And bring him by the clinic in about ten days to get those stitches out, okay?"

"Will do, Harvey. Thanks again." Charlie turned to Shane as Harvey walked past them to the door. "Shane, thank you too, for everything. You're a good friend."

Shane froze halfway out the door, unsure how to process this statement. At last, he managed a careless-sounding "Whatever, farm boy," tossed over his shoulder as he left. He thought he'd been successfully flippant, but judging by the laugh that followed him out the door, he was wrong.

Oh, well. There were worse things than having a friend. As long as he found someone else to help the next time he broke his dog.

* * * * *

Harvey leaned against the bar that night, pushing his heels back to the floor to feel the nice stretch in the backs of his legs. At thirty-eight, he was already getting too old for this clinic business; every day felt like it brought a new litany of aches and pains. If he'd identified them in someone else, he would have massaged them out, but there was nobody in his life to do it for him. *No one to doctor the doctor,* he thought, with just a hint of bitterness.

"Harvey, buddy," Gus greeted him, making his way down the bar. "What can I get you?"

"I'll have a glass of blackberry wine, thanks, Gus."

"You opening a tab, or—?"

"This one's on me, Gus," came a voice to his right, and he turned to see Charlie sidling up to the bar. "Got to thank Dr. Harvey here for stitching up my poor pup earlier," he added, beaming at Harvey.

“Oh, there’s no need, really—” Harvey stammered, but Gus had already waved in acceptance and moved away, leaving a bottle of wine and two glasses. Harvey pushed his glasses up his nose and wondered if he’d ever stop feeling off-balance around this farmer.

“You don’t have to drink with me if you don’t want to, I didn’t intend to hijack your evening,” Charlie assured him, taking the bottle and pouring them each a glass. “I just wanted a chance to give you my thanks again. Bones means a lot to me.”

“Is he doing all right with the stitches?”

“Doing just fine, thanks. He’s been sleeping all afternoon, think his little adventure wore him out. And I covered the pit after you left.” Charlie took a sip of the wine, exhaled in obvious gusto, then asked, “So are you waiting for someone, or…?”

“No, I usually just come here alone to unwind,” Harvey said, and was it his imagination or did Charlie look a little disappointed?

“Got it,” he said, voice as chipper as ever. “Well, I can leave you to it, then. Like I said, I didn’t mean to—”

“No!” Harvey blurted, hoping he wasn’t blushing. “I mean, no, you don’t have to go, if you don’t want to. I would...enjoy your company.” Nope, he was definitely blushing, and judging by the grin on Charlie’s face, it was visible even in the dim light of the bar.

“Well, then.” He inclined his glass slightly at Harvey in a little toast, then settled his elbows against the bar. “How does a brilliant doctor like yourself come to live in a place like Pelican Town? Don’t get me wrong, it’s lovely, but I can tell you’re not from around these parts.”

Harvey decided not to argue with the “brilliant” assessment, though his cheeks burned again. “It’s a bit of a long story,” he admitted.

“I’ve got nowhere to be. If you feel like sharing, that is.”

“Well…” Harvey took a fortifying sip of wine, glancing across his face at Charlie; was he just trying to be polite? He looked genuinely interested and at ease, though, so Harvey decided to go on. He’d never really talked about it with anyone but Maru; once the shine of being the newest person in town had worn off, people had stopped asking him about himself. “I’m from Zuzu City originally, went away for medical school in the Capitol, then back to the city for work. My own physician since childhood was retiring, and I’d intended to take over his practice, you see. It was a lovely clinic, state-of-the-art, in the heart of the city. I worked there for, oh, six years? It was good for a while. But eventually I needed a change of scenery, so I sent letters to clinics in every town in a 300-mile radius. Pelican Town wasn’t the only one that wrote back, but they seemed to really need me, so I came here.”

“That doesn’t seem like such a long story,” Charlie said, raising an eyebrow.

“No, I suppose it doesn’t.”

“So what was her name?”

Harvey choked on his sip of wine, quickly wiping his mouth with the back of his hand. “I’m sorry?”

Charlie quirked a rueful smile. “The reason you left your fancy city practice. I’m guessing it wasn’t just a sudden urgent need for country air. Quick relocation usually means losing a job or losing a girl, and it seems like it wasn’t the job.” He grimaced. “I’m sorry, I’m being incredibly nosy. Don’t feel like you have to answer that, it was rude.”

“Philip.”

“What?”

Harvey sighed, refilling his wine glass; this was going to take some extra liquid courage. “His name was Philip. He was my predecessor’s son, and he ran the business side of the clinic. We bonded over paperwork and jazz music, and then...other things.”

“Oh!” Charlie said, his eyes wide, and Harvey looked across his face at him. “No, no, I’m just surprised, is all. The town gossips all think you’ve got eyes for Maru. Sorry. Lot of assumptions going around.”

Harvey huffed a quick laugh, eyes on the wine swirling in his glass. “Maru’s a very close friend,” he said. “And a lovely girl, but not my type, unfortunately.”

Charlie’s momentary surprise seemed to have dissipated, and he watched Harvey with sympathetic eyes. “So what happened with Philip? Please don’t answer if you don’t want to.”

“No, it’s fine,” Harvey sighed. “Probably time I exorcised that particular ghost.” He paused for a long moment, gathering his thoughts; Charlie did nothing but wait patiently, occasionally sipping his wine. “We were together for almost five years. We moved in together after one...We were happy at first, or I thought we were. The Ferngill Republic legalized gay marriage just before our fifth anniversary, and I was so excited, I closed the office early and bought a ring, went home to surprise him.” He trailed off here, his eyebrows drawing together in pain at the memory. Charlie paused in the act of lifting his glass to his mouth, grimacing.

“Don’t tell me.”

“He wasn’t alone, of course,” Harvey murmured, staring at the floor. “I doubt he’d spent much time alone our entire relationship. I’d always kind of suspected...I don’t know why I didn’t confront him about it earlier.”

“Because you loved him,” Charlie cut in gently, and Harvey met his eye; his face was full of compassion. “And you’re a kind person, and you expected him to be kind, too.”

“Yes, well.” Harvey cleared his throat, straightening a little. “I found myself single for the first time in half a decade, the very summer that every couple we knew got married. I went to a dozen weddings. It was hellish.”

“God,” Charlie groaned, refilling his own glass. “I can’t imagine.”

Harvey smiled, a little bitterly, and ducked his head in a nod of acknowledgement. “What about you?” he asked. “How did you end up here? I know your grandfather owned the farm years ago, but it sat abandoned for some time.”

“It did,” Charlie agreed. “I lived in Zuzu City, too, for a long time.”

“You did!”

“Sure did. Wish we’d run into each other then. I could’ve used a friend in those days,” Charlie confirmed, smiling sadly. “I worked for Joja, actually. Desk job, very white collar, the kind of thing you’re taught to shoot for in business school. I went every day, I convinced myself I was living the dream, but one day I looked around and just…” He trailed off, leaving Harvey hanging on the end of his sentence.

“You just what?”

Charlie sighed. “I realized I’d never done one single thing that mattered, ever. You know? All the work I did for Joja, it was just to put more money into some corporate goon’s pockets. I had a bland little apartment in a bland little neighborhood and a bland little desk in a cubicle. I realized if I kept on the path I was on, I could go my entire life without building anything of substance. And I couldn’t stand it. So...I took my grandpa up on an offer he’d made years before, and I came here.”

Harvey was amazed; the courage it must have taken to walk away from a whole life, to take up a profession he knew nothing about, to devote his days to backbreaking labor instead of paperwork. “You’re very brave,” he finally said. Charlie looked surprised at this.

“No more than you,” he said. “We both uprooted our lives to come here, didn’t we?”

Harvey’s instinct was to argue, but he held it in. “I suppose we did,” he agreed. “I just wish I’d done it when I was younger. Sometimes I think I made the change too late.”

“Too late for what?” Charlie asked, and Harvey wished he could swallow the words back down, but there was nothing for it. He sighed.

“I don’t know...the whole family thing, marriage, children. Everyone here is either paired off already or too young for me.” He laughed. “Nobody wants an old sawbones with a studio apartment, you know.”

“I don’t think that’s true,” Charlie said, so quietly Harvey almost missed it under the din of the saloon. When he turned to look, Charlie seemed to have moved closer; he was leaning on the bar with his elbow nearly touching Harvey’s, looking down at the floor, his eyelashes casting shadows over his cheekbones. When he glanced up at Harvey through those lashes, a small smile at the corners of his mouth, Harvey felt something warm and heavy unfurling deliciously in his belly. It could almost have been the wine—he could blame it on the wine—but he knew the feeling, recognized it even though it had been years and years since he’d last felt it.

Harvey opened his mouth to say something—what, he wasn't sure; probably something regrettable and humiliating—but the spell was broken by a clatter at the other end of the bar, Pam having stumbled into a table and sent a handful of glasses shattering to the floor. Both men straightened, suddenly self-conscious of their proximity. Charlie set his wine glass down on the bar, smoothing his shirt down with both hands.

"I'd better be getting to bed," he said, and Harvey tried not to look as disappointed as he felt. "Gotta keep an eye on Bones tonight. Harvey…" He turned that brown-eyed gaze on him again, and Harvey felt pinned to the spot. "Thank you for sharing all that with me. I feel as though I know you so much better now."

"I just hope I didn't bore you," Harvey said, retreating into the comfortable waters of self-deprecation. Charlie didn't take the bait, just smiled with a warmth that melted Harvey's insides and shook his head.

"Not possible," he said, and clapped Harvey on the shoulder. "You're far too interesting. Good night, doc."

"Good night, Charlie," he called after him, watching probably too closely as the farmer sauntered out the door. As soon as the door closed, he leaned against the bar again, feeling his shoulder tingling lightly where Charlie had touched it. The warm weight behind his navel hadn't gone away, leading to only one conclusion:

The crush was no longer just a crush. Harvey *liked* him. He was falling for the farmer.

Chapter 4: Spring, Year 1

Chapter Summary

The village prepares for a dance. Charlie looks for a date. Confusing feelings are had.

Chapter Notes

A short one this time, I'm sorry! If it's any consolation, the word count on these is going to start creeping way, WAY up.

Charlie had imagined a lot of challenges when he'd decided on his new direction in life. Learning to farm—that was a big one. Making friends with a village full of strangers, which had happily been less of an obstacle than he'd thought. Overcoming his existential crisis had been on the list as well, and thus far, he'd found the work of farming to be demanding enough to keep his mind off the Big Questions. But at no point had anyone warned him about the Flower Dance.

It had become a popular topic, and no matter where he went, it followed him. "Don't be silly, you have to go," Marnie told him as he bought chicken feed. "It's tradition. Dress up nice."

"And who will *you* be asking for a dance?" Jodi asked, winking, as he crossed the square on the way to the saloon.

"Have any of the pretty girls in town caught your eye?" Caroline asked pointedly, while her daughter Abigail attempted to disappear into the store shelves behind her.

It wasn't that he was opposed to going, exactly. He liked parties, he liked dancing, he didn't even mind dancing with women. The problem was that he wasn't good enough friends with any of the women in town to ask them for a dance without potentially leading them on, and he didn't want to do that just to save face in front of the village matchmakers.

There was one exception, but she had turned out to be a dead end. "I'm sorry, Charlie," Maru had said, sounding genuinely regretful as she accepted the new (slug-free) cauliflower he'd brought her. "But I always dance with Harvey, and I don't want to stand him up unless he's got another offer."

Ah. Charlie instantly felt silly, trying to wedge himself in the middle of arrangements that had stood for years. "No problem," he said, in as cheerful a voice as he could muster. "I was actually really hoping to get out of dancing, so you're doing me a favor. Just had to prove to

Jodi and Caroline that I made an effort, you know." He winked, and Maru gave a sympathetic laugh. As they chatted, Harvey emerged from the back, brightening when he saw who the visitor was.

"Hi, Charlie," he greeted him, coming to stand behind Maru.

"Hey, Harvey." Charlie was relieved to see that Harvey was becoming more comfortable around him; Bones' emergency and their evening in the saloon seemed to have steadied him a bit. It was much easier to befriend someone when they didn't hide as soon as you came in the door. "Got a refill for you."

He pulled the jar of pickles out of his basket—green beans, this time—and as always, felt a little surge of pride at Harvey's reaction. "My favorite!" he exclaimed, taking the jar without hesitation this time. "The last ones were delicious. You've gotten very good at this. Thank you again. Although…" He looked up from the jar, seeming to rein himself in a little. "You really shouldn't be giving away food for free."

Charlie had expected an argument along these lines, and he was prepared. "Those are actually just extra. I keep making more than I can fit in my shipping box," he lied smoothly. "Honestly, you're doing me a favor. My house would be buried in pickles without you."

A smile crinkled the corners of Harvey's green eyes, and Charlie was struck again by how much the expression changed him. "Well, I'm happy to help, then," he said. "What brings you in today?"

Charlie opened his mouth to brush off the question, but Maru laughed and beat him to it. "Charlie was just asking me to the Flower Dance," she said wryly, and Harvey's eyes widened. "Don't worry, I turned him down. I wouldn't leave you hanging."

"Oh," Harvey said, seeming a little deflated. He smiled at Charlie again, but it didn't reach his eyes this time, and Charlie felt suddenly guilty. *Why?* "Well, of course I wouldn't want to get in the way. If you'd rather be Charlie's date, go right ahead, Maru."

"It was just as friends," Charlie said hastily, putting his hands up. "Just to get the party police off my back. I'm more than happy to be sitting this one out, believe me. " He smiled in what he hoped was a convincing way. "I'll watch you guys this year. Maybe by next year, I'll have a date, huh?"

Maru nodded absently, already examining the cauliflower, but Harvey still seemed oddly unhappy. "Maybe so," he agreed, and cleared his throat. "Well. Thank you again for the pickles, Charlie. If they're anything like the last batch, I'm sure they'll be gone in two days."

Charlie didn't know why the atmosphere in the room had changed, but he knew a dismissal when he saw one. "I'll keep them coming, then," he said, with a dorky little salute he regretted instantly. "See you later, doc. Bye, Maru."

The weirdness at the clinic stayed with him for a couple of days, but at least Jodi and Caroline *had* seemed satisfied that he'd given it his best shot. Caroline had offered, in a conspiratorial tone, to talk to Abigail for him; he'd refused so quickly and emphatically he

thought he might have offended her, but he couldn't find it in him to be remorseful about it. His small-town neighbors were mostly lovely, but God, they were a meddling bunch. Despite his lack of a date, it had been made clear to him that he was still expected to go, and so he dutifully arrived at the southern meadow in his cleanest clothes on the appointed morning.

The party had already been going for some time; Charlie believed in being fashionably late, especially when you were hoping to avoid the attention of well-intentioned neighbors. Little clusters of townsfolk were scattered around the clearing: Sebastian with Sam and Abigail in the corner by the food; George and Evelyn near a barrel of flowers, a look of pride on Evelyn's face; Harvey and Maru with Penny, off to one side. He nearly started toward this last group, but then remembered the strange ending to his last clinic visit, and changed direction. Shane was hovering near the punch bowl, wearing a blue suit and clearly well on his way to a solid buzz. He gave a brief nod of acknowledgement as Charlie approached.

"Good sauce," he said simply, and that was a good enough endorsement for Charlie. He ladled himself out a cup, hoping he could toss it back quickly enough to insulate him from questions about his love life.

"No date," Shane said, more of an observation than a question. Charlie shook his head.

"Not this year. I don't know anybody well enough yet. You?"

Shane gave a bone-deep sigh, glancing across the meadow to where Emily laughed with Clint. "Emily says she's dancing with me," he said gloomily. "She made me wear the outfit and everything."

Charlie choked on his punch, trying not to laugh. "You don't get a say in this?"

"Try arguing with her sometime," Shane protested. "It's impossible. You list off fifteen reasons you're not going to do it, then somehow she walks out the door with your tux measurements and a reminder to pick her up at ten."

"Sounds like I could use some pointers." Emily caught him looking and waved brightly; he raised his cup to her before taking another drink. Like all the other young women in town, she was dressed in a simple white gown, and she looked lovely. The young men all wore blue suits like Shane's. Where did they come from? Would Charlie have been forced into one if he'd managed to find a date?

Some questions were better left unanswered.

"All right, folks!" Mayor Lewis called, earning another full-body sigh from Shane. "It's time to line up, so grab your partner if you've got one!"

"Any chance you want to dance with Emily instead?" Shane asked hopefully, scowling when Charlie laughed. He shoved his drink into the farmer's free hand, trudging off toward the assembling lines of dancers like a man facing a firing squad. He didn't seem to be alone in the sentiment; Harvey, Maru, Sebastian and Leah all seemed to be dragging their feet as well, but they obediently took their places. Haley stood at the center with Alex, her blonde hair gleaming beneath a crown of flowers.

As the music started, Charlie found himself more interested in the dance than he'd expected. How did everyone know the same steps? Were there practices, or did you just sort of learn it by osmosis? Pelican Town was seeming like a weirder place every day. He let his eyes wander down the line. Haley and Alex did it perfectly, of course, looking as though they'd rehearsed it a million times (and Charlie certainly believed Haley was capable of that). Shane still wore his look of agony, but he shuffled through the steps well enough as Emily put her own special flourish on them. Abigail's obvious enthusiasm seemed to have warmed Sebastian to the dance, and the same was true of Elliott and Leah. As his gaze drifted past the clearly happy Sam and Penny, it landed on Harvey and Maru, and Charlie was caught off-guard by the abrupt knot in his stomach.

He was suddenly upset—but *why?* Was it still some lingering weirdness from his asking Maru to the dance, and Harvey's reaction? He didn't think that was it; Harvey looked totally normal, joking with Maru as they danced. Charlie obviously hadn't *really* wanted to dance with Maru, anyway, so it couldn't be jealousy. As the two moved toward each other, Harvey lifted Maru's hand above her head to help her through a twirl, and the knot tightened with sudden clarity. Maybe it *was* jealousy—but not because he'd wanted to dance with Maru.

As Maru finished her twirl and the two traded places, Harvey's face came into view, and Charlie took a moment to just watch him. He *had* felt a little spark between them back at the saloon, when he'd looked up to find the doctor gazing down at him in something like wonder. There might even have been a tiny one back at the farm as Harvey had finished up with Bones, though Charlie had chalked his sudden giddiness up to relief about his dog. But this was ridiculous—aside from his daily visits to the clinic and the handful of times they'd seen each other outside of it, Charlie really didn't know him all that well. And he was nothing like Charlie's usual type (except for the glasses—Charlie couldn't resist a bespectacled man), and anyway Charlie was nearly thirty years old, he didn't get *crushes* anymore.

Harvey turned his head, part of the dance, and met Charlie's eyes before the farmer could look away. Charlie felt himself blush at being caught, but he didn't break eye contact, for some reason he couldn't explain. Nor could he explain Harvey's expression, which had been perfectly content just moments before and now looked, well, *sad.* He held Charlie's gaze for a long moment over Maru's head, still with that melancholy look, until the dance finally required him to turn around. As soon as Harvey looked away, Charlie felt as though some kind of spell had been lifted. What was he *thinking,* staring at Harvey in the middle of a town festival? It probably hadn't been sadness; probably the doctor had just been confused by Charlie's weird ogling, as he should be.

Suddenly, Charlie really didn't want to be here when the dance ended. He set both drinks down on the food table, catching Gus's curious look. "You know, I think I've been out in the sun too long today. I'm not feeling great," he lied. "Gonna head home and lie down for a while."

"That's too bad," Gus said, frowning. "It's a shame to miss half your first Flower Dance!"

"I'm more disappointed to miss the food," Charlie replied, earning a chuckle from Gus. "I'll eat double next time, I promise. Bye, Gus."

He left before anyone else could stop him, and determinedly did not look at Harvey as he made his way toward the bridge. He wasn't sure if those green eyes would still be on him if he looked up, and until he had a chance to get his thoughts straight, he wasn't sure whether or not he wanted to find out.

Chapter 5: Summer, Year 1

Chapter Summary

> A change in seasons makes life busy on the farm. Harvey frets, Maru meddles, and a package arrives at the clinic.

“Bones,” Charlie asked conversationally, wiping sweat out of his eyes for the umpteenth time that hour, “when did it get so fucking hot?” The dog seemed uninterested in answering; he lifted his head briefly, squinting at Charlie from the shade beneath the front porch, and then dropped it listlessly back to the ground. Summer was in full swing in the Valley, and while Charlie was looking forward to starting his new crops, he wasn't thrilled at the prospect of doing it in this heat. *This relentless, searing, brain-melting heat.* He had already taken to working shirtless and tying a bandana around his head to keep the sweaty hair out of his eyes, which made him feel vaguely like Rambo, if Rambo had been planting blueberry bushes for the last five days.

He’d been so busy with the change in seasons—pulling up what was left of last year’s crops, shopping for seeds, hoeing and fertilizing and planting—he hadn’t had a moment to spare for leisurely trips into the village. His forays into town had been directly to Pierre’s for seeds, then to the Stardrop to pick up something for dinner, then right back to the farm. The trips had been made a tiny bit easier by his discovery of an old, rusty bicycle behind the abandoned Community Center; it wasn't *much* faster than walking, but at least he didn’t have to carry everything himself. Fertilizer got heavy.

A few of the villagers had made offhand comments about the old mine northeast of town, and Charlie had begun to seriously consider taking a trip down there—he had his old pickaxe, and ore was *expensive*— but hadn’t found the time yet. Getting his crops in was first priority, and then he could think about invitingly dark and cool holes in the ground. There were rumors of monsters in the mine, but he’d shrugged those off. Grown adults trading *ghost stories,* it was pitiful, honestly.

He’d taken to blaring old 90s music on the stereo he’d brought with him from Zuzu. It helped alleviate the monotonous, backbreaking work of hoeing, but it also helped drown out his own thoughts. He was avoiding the elephant in his mental room—namely, whether or not he was developing a little *thing* for the shy town doctor. The thing was, he couldn’t really afford a distraction right now. If he was going to really do this farm thing, he needed to focus on it, not spend all day fighting the urge to traipse off to the clinic and say hello. He figured he needed to put in at least a solid year of work before he even considered adding the complications of a relationship to his life. Really, it was for the best that he was too busy to leave the farm; without popping in to see Harvey in the afternoons, surely his little crush would have a chance to fade.

There was a flaw in this logic, though: a furry, floppy-eared flaw. Every time Charlie looked at Bones, he thought about the way Harvey had helped him after his injury. He remembered the gentle way he had treated Bones, the calm, methodical movements of his hands. He hadn't seemed the least bit ruffled that his patient was canine rather than human, and he'd been so *confident.* Charlie couldn't suppress a mental image of being treated by those hands himself, and a little shiver ran through him. He'd never thought he had a thing for doctors, but then Harvey was a combo-breaker in a lot of ways.

He wasn't exactly Charlie's type—most of his boyfriends had been closer to his own height and age, and looking back, he noticed he'd dated a lot of blondes—but there *was* something about him that Charlie had noticed from day one. He didn't seem to be able to keep anything from his face, blushing or smiling at the slightest provocation, and Charlie found it fascinating. You could watch the thoughts and feelings play out on his features like movies on a screen; it was fantastic. Add in the pretty eyes, the glasses, the thick wavy hair, and the surprisingly gorgeous smile, and yeah, he was definitely crush material. Even the mustache was actually kinda working for him.

Maybe more than *kinda.*

Great job, Charles. Really keeping your mind off things.

With effort, he brought himself back to his running mental checklist of farm work. These blueberries were just about done, and corn was next. Once he was through with those, he needed to feed the rapidly-growing chickens and refill the pickling jars. For reasons he couldn't explain, he'd somehow added two more pickling jars beside the first, despite the fact that his space was limited and it was a huge pain to prep vegetables without a kitchen. Pickles weren't even that profitable.

Or maybe they were. He'd never sold any, actually.

* * * * *

Harvey was getting so, so tired of having this conversation. "You know I can't discuss my other patients with you, Caroline," he said wearily, his otoscope hovering uselessly in midair. "Now, can I please continue with your examination?"

As she always did, Caroline pressed the issue. "But I'm her *mother,"* she insisted, as though that changed anything. "Surely you can tell me if—"

"Abigail is a legal adult, as you know, and that means she is entitled to the same doctor-patient confidentiality as anyone else. *Including* from her mother," he added, as she opened her mouth to protest. "Now if you'll just hold still—"

"I just worry about her," Caroline continued, and Harvey wanted to beat his head against the wall. He settled for gritting his teeth and counting to five before answering.

"I'm sure that you do. Parents worry about their children, even when they're grown up. But she has rights, and I have responsibilities." He lifted the otoscope again, and Caroline tried one last time.

“Maybe if you just left her file—”

“Caroline!”

When Caroline had left the clinic ten minutes later, huffy and indignant, Maru poked her head into the exam room. Harvey was making notes in Caroline’s file, and hoped that if he looked occupied enough, Maru might leave him alone.

“What was that about?”

“I’m busy, Maru.”

“Of course you’re not, Caroline’s vitals haven’t changed in three years,” she said briskly. “Seriously, what’s up with you?”

“She’s always trying to wheedle information out of me about Abigail. Who is an *adult,* and who does not need her mother’s permission to be sexually active,” he snapped. Maru blinked, leaning in the doorway.

“Yeah, but she always does that, and you never lose your temper.” She squinted at him in a way that made Harvey profoundly uneasy. What had he done to deserve such a nosy assistant? “Is this about Charlie?”

“No,” Harvey said shortly, doing his best to sound nonchalant. He failed, of course.

“You know he’s really busy with the new season. Pierre said he’s been in there buying seeds almost every day for the last week. I’m sure he’ll stop by when he can.”

“I don’t know why that would be any concern of mine,” Harvey replied. To himself, he added, *but Pierre’s seen him, hasn’t he?* Charlie literally had to walk past the door of the clinic to reach the shop, and while Harvey knew he undoubtedly *was* busy, he couldn’t shake the unease he’d felt when Charlie had left the Flower Dance early. They’d shared a long look during the dance, and Harvey had felt utterly exposed under the scrutiny, but he hadn’t set eyes on Charlie since then. Surely that couldn’t be a coincidence. Had Harvey overstepped, by staring back at him that way? Was Charlie avoiding him? He wished he knew what to do; he could live without being more-than-friends, but he *had* hoped they could at least be friends.

A hand on his shoulder brought him out of his reverie, and he looked up at Maru, whose gaze was too knowing for comfort. “Don’t freak out about it,” she said gently. “I know he misses us, too.”

Somehow, her use of *us* rather than *you* helped loosen something in Harvey’s chest—just a little, but it was enough. Maru and Charlie were good friends; surely he wouldn’t avoid her just to stay away from Harvey. “Thank you, Maru,” he said, a bit thickly, and cleared his throat. “Would you, um, go get me the results of Clint’s blood work? I’d like to review them before his appointment.”

Maru rolled her eyes, but she took her hand back and headed for the door, which was all he'd really wanted: to be left alone with his *definitely-not-freaking-out* thoughts. "Of course, Doctor. Right away."

* * * * *

They were more than a week into the summer now, and if Charlie had thought it was hot before, he had been a simple city child. Every day seemed to dawn sunnier and more brutal than the last. Somehow, he'd only pictured farming as a spring-and-fall kind of activity. Fortunately, all the crops were in, so now all he needed to do was water them. By hand. Twice a day, because it was so *fucking hot.*

The Rambo ensemble had proven to be the only way he could be remotely comfortable out in the fields, and he hadn't even put on a shirt for three days. Who was around to care, anyway? Bones couldn't judge, he was naked all the time. The good news was that his pasty, slightly soft Cubicle Bod had been steadily worked into something he was beginning to be proud of, and he'd developed a sort of perma-tan over most of his body now that he'd gotten religious about sunscreen. Harvey had given him a tube of SPF 70 and a brief lecture about the dangers of sun exposure on one of his visits to the clinic before the Flower Dance, and he'd gotten better about actually remembering to use it.

Finishing the row he was watering, Charlie looked over what he still had to do—still two more rows of corn, then a row of hot peppers and three rows of melons—and decided a break was in order. He dropped his watering can and headed for the chicken coop, which was at least shady, if not actually cool. As he cracked the door open, he pushed a foot through to ensure no chicks felt inclined to make a break for it, or at least one chick in particular. Sure enough, his little troublemaker peeped in protest at being pushed away from the door.

"Don't try it, Pizza," he warned, squeezing in and pulling the door shut behind him. The chicks flocked to him, hopping and making a tiny ruckus. He marveled at how fast they were growing—they'd already doubled in size, and started growing real feathers. After asking Marnie about it, he thought he could tell by the shape of the feathers what sex they were likely to be. If he was right in his educated guesses, he was shaping up to have five hens (he'd named them after too many beers and had decided on Posh, Sporty, Scary, Baby, and Ginger) and one rooster: Pizza, of course.

He sat and cooed at them for a while, stroking their feathers and checking them for mites. It was starting to get lonely on the farm, with only Bones and the chicks for company; he was hoping to be able to resume his trips to town soon, once the crops were well-established enough that an afternoon wilt wouldn't kill them off. He hadn't even been to Pierre's since he'd gotten his last crops in the ground, and cabin fever was taking a toll on him. Not for the first time, he wished he at least had a phone. Who would have thought a place still existed on Earth with no cell service?

A riotous barking from outside the coop startled him, and he quickly shooed Ginger off his lap. Squinting into the sudden sunshine outside, he could just make out a small overall-clad figure being jumped all over by his dog.

“Bones, cool it!” he shouted, and the puppy fell back, still doing a happy little bounce on his front paws. The newcomer didn’t seem to mind; he could hear her laughing from here, and he knew that laugh well.

“Maru!” he called, jogging to the porch where she stood. “Hey, it’s so good to see you!”

It really *was* good to see her, though he barely recognized her out of uniform. She grinned at him, shielding her eyes with one hand, and came down the porch steps to meet him.

“Just wanted to make sure you didn’t fall in a well yourself,” she joked, glancing him up and down. “Hey, you’re getting kinda ripped! Nice work! Shame there’s nobody around to appreciate the scenery.”

“I’ll have you know I’m seeing five gorgeous girls,” he protested, reaching for the water bottle he’d left on the stairs. “They’re a little young for me, but oh well.”

She laughed. “Chicks are all over you, huh?”

“Can’t seem to keep them away.” He stretched, feeling a few satisfying crackles down his spine. “Want to come in? I was just taking a break.” Charlie sort of hoped she wouldn’t; was still kind of embarrassed by the inside of the house. It wasn't much, just one room with a bed, a rickety little table, an ancient TV that only got three channels, and a fireplace he hadn’t needed to use yet. One corner was piled with all the stuff he hadn’t bought furniture to store yet, and laundry was strewn everywhere, waiting for a day when he had free time to clean. It was essentially the farm equivalent of a freshman dorm room, and occasionally he did think longingly of his Zuzu City apartment. It had been bland as hell, but it had A/C and a kitchen, which was something.

Of course, Maru did want to come in, and so Charlie found himself perched on the edge of the bed while Maru sat at the table. He wanted to offer her something to drink, but literally all he had was well water. “Sorry, I’m not the best host,” he said with what he hoped was an apologetic-looking smile.

“Eh, it’s fine. You’ve probably got bigger things to worry about than closet space,” she replied. “Your crops are looking great, though. Are you getting the hang of it?”

“Yeah, I think so, it’s just the watering that kills me,” he groaned. “It’s so hot, I have to do it twice a day, and it takes *forever,* and I just hate it, honestly. I could free up half my day if I didn’t have to do it by hand.”

“I could show you how to build a sprinkler,” Maru offered. Charlie stared.

“How do you know how to build a sprinkler?”

“I don’t, really, but it can’t be that hard. I’ll figure it out and come back and show you.”

Charlie was speechless. “So,” he began slowly, “when your mom and Harvey told me you were a genius, they meant, like...an *actual genius.”*

“Yeah,” Maru laughed. “Don’t worry, though. I’m not judging you for your tiny intellect.”

“Oh, that’s a relief.”

They laughed and caught up for a bit, Charlie telling her about the chickens and Maru recounting an invention she’d been working on in her spare time. The details were totally lost on Charlie, but she promised to show it to him when she was done, so he assumed he could just give a knowing nod and congratulate her when it was finished. Still, though, he had an odd feeling she hadn’t come by just to tell him about her robot or whatever.

“So, not that this hasn’t been great,” he began, taking another drink from his water bottle, “but you’ve never come out to visit me before. Something on your mind?”

Maru smiled, ducking her head as though she’d been caught out. “Oh, it’s just been a while since you’ve made it into the clinic. Pretty close to two weeks now, I think?”

Charlie groaned. “I know. I haven’t seen anyone except Pierre and Gus, and even then it’s only for like five minutes. I’m going a little bit crazy. Solitude is nice to an extent, but sometimes I think I can hear Posh and Ginger actually talking to me, which can’t be good.”

Maru blinked at him. “As in the Spice Girls?”

“It’s not important,” he said hastily. She shook her head, visibly deciding to let it go.

“Listen,” she said in an undertone. “I swear I’m not really the meddling type—Yoba knows we’ve got enough of those around here—but the thing is, Harvey doesn’t have a lot of friends. Actually, before you showed up, I think I was his *only* friend. He’s pretty introverted, although you *may* not have noticed.” She rolled her eyes affectionately, and Charlie huffed a laugh. “Anyway, I know you’re busy, just...don’t forget about him, okay? We miss seeing you around.”

Charlie felt both guilty and a little bit touched; he hadn’t realized his absence would have had a real effect on Harvey. “I really have just been crazy busy,” he explained. “You saw the crops out there, and I’ve got the chickens, I haven’t been trying to—”

“I know that, I know,” she interrupted gently, making soothing little motions with her hands. “I totally get it. I just, I think he thinks you’re avoiding him or something. I have no idea why.” She stood up, thrusting her hands into the pockets of her overalls. “I don’t want to take up your whole day. If you can’t stop by, maybe just drop him a line? I know it’d make him feel better.”

“He’s probably just jonesing for pickles,” Charlie said, and Maru laughed.

“Yeah, I’ve been meaning to tell you. Now that the cauliflower’s dried up, I won’t be talking to you anymore. See you next spring.”

“At the rate I’m going, it might be that long before I have any free time,” he said darkly. “If you figure out those sprinklers, I swear to you I’ll find a way to grow cauliflower year-round. I’ll grow them in a pot in my house if I have to.”

“I’ll hold you to that,” she said, and he walked her back to the farm’s entrance to say goodbye.

Once Maru had left, Charlie went back to his watering, and for once his mind was fixated on something other than the relentless heat. Harvey missed him; Harvey worried Charlie was avoiding him; Harvey thought of him as a friend. He knew this obsessive line of thinking was counterproductive—hadn’t he *just* decided to keep the doctor at arm’s length?—but surely it was cruel to let him go on thinking he’d done something wrong. He still didn’t have time to go socialize, but maybe there was something else he could do for Harvey. As his friend.

* * * * *

Harvey had never fully appreciated the mail before. It was, generally speaking, just the way stress and financial strain entered his life; every day brought more bills, bills he often couldn’t pay. The economy of Pelican Town was a shaky one, and he could never bring himself to charge enough for his services when he knew the patient was struggling. Hell, even Maru wouldn’t have been able to live on the tiny salary he paid her without living with her parents. Harvey knew there was a stereotype elsewhere in the world that doctors were rolling in cash—and back in Zuzu City, he could have been one of them—but that didn’t apply to small-town GPs.

So the mail was more of a nemesis than a friend, usually. But on this particular day, he was struck by a very different feeling as he sifted through the mail. Because there, on the bottom of the stack, was a small package addressed to him in an untidy black scrawl, and the return address was Charlie’s farm.

He sat back in his chair, taking a moment to absorb Charlie’s handwriting, which he’d never seen before. It was large and jagged, capital and lowercase letters interspersed seemingly at random. Somehow, it suited him; he could picture Charlie dashing it off between farm chores, hurrying to get the package out before the mail came. Carefully, he cut through the tape and opened the box...and broke into a grin. There, tucked into a nest of shredded paper, was a jar of pickled radishes. As he lifted it from the box, he saw that a letter was nestled under the jar. He unfolded it, feeling both excited and nervous.

Harvey,

I knew you must be running low—or probably out, by now—so I thought I’d send you a refill. Sorry it’s taken me so long. You’ve probably guessed, but the start of a new season has meant a crazy amount of work for me. You wouldn’t even recognize the farm from the last time you were here. Or Bones, for that matter. I swear he’s gonna outgrow my house by the end of next week, at the rate he’s growing. (Not that that’s such a huge accomplishment, you’ve been in my house.)

It gets kind of lonely around here when I don’t have time to go out. Bones and the chickens are good company, but they don’t talk much, at least not in English. Actually, one of the chickens talks a LOT, I can never get him to shut up. I think Marnie knew what she was doing when she pushed me into taking that one home. Anyway, I’m kind of

rambling but my point is, you're always welcome to stop by if you want to. I know it's a long walk. Hopefully soon it'll rain a little and I can get back into town for something besides seeds.

I'm actually about to try something new (well, something ELSE new). Our mutual genius friend thinks she's figured out how to build me some sprinklers, but she needs metal to do it, so I'm going to head into the old mines and see what I can dig up. I have to say, sitting in my cubicle four months ago, I would never have believed I would one day head underground with a pickaxe. My life has gone completely off the rails. I think in a good way?

Enough about me. What about you? You can write me back, or just save up some answers for the next time I see you, which will hopefully be soon. Has the clinic been busy this summer? Have you gotten any sun at all? Did you know that channel 3 airs reruns of Star Trek: The Next Generation *at 10:30 PM? Can you guess what crew member I had a crush on growing up? It's not a very original answer, I'm afraid.*

Well, I've taken up enough of your time for one day. Enjoy the pickles. I'll bring more next time I see you. I'm wearing sunscreen, I promise.

Charlie

Harvey read the letter three times in a row, thrilled to have some words from Charlie that he could analyze and think about without having to respond on the spot. In some ways it was easier, not having to look at his *(perfect)* face while he "listened" to him. The paper wasn't as photogenic, but it didn't mind being stared at.

He hadn't mentioned the awkwardness surrounding the Flower Dance at all, and his tone seemed totally normal. Had Harvey imagined the whole thing? He knew their eyes had met, he hadn't made that up, but maybe Charlie had just been zoning. It certainly wouldn't be unheard of for someone's mind to wander during the slow, traditional dance. At any rate, Harvey felt a weight lifted from his shoulders. Whatever had happened, it hadn't driven Charlie away. He *had* just been busy with his crops, just as Maru had said.

The bit about the mine was alarming, frankly. What was he thinking, traipsing off to dig up ore in a monster-infested cave? Had Maru even warned him about the dangers? He was going to need to have a chat with her about that; she couldn't be encouraging people to go risk their necks just to find material for her projects. Hopefully, the hot weather would keep him busy enough that he wouldn't be able to carry out that particular plan for a while.

The part of the letter that drove him the most crazy, of course, was the line about his *Star Trek* crush. Harvey wished desperately that Charlie had at least mentioned whether it was a man or a woman. He thought it was possible that Charlie liked men, but knowing one way or the other would really make his life *so* much easier. That question deserved some further pondering, maybe while watching some reruns himself. He found that he liked the idea of watching the same thing as Charlie, way on the other side of town.

More than anything, Harvey was just giddy with happiness that Charlie had *written* him. He'd taken the time out of his obviously busy day to ask Harvey about his own, and send him

a gift, and wasn't that a good sign? Perhaps it meant something, that Charlie had been thinking about Harvey while Harvey had been moping about him.

Of course it *didn't* mean anything. That was a ridiculous fantasy.

...But what if it did?

Chapter 6: Summer, Year 1

Chapter Summary

Letters are exchanged. Charlie disregards good advice. Harvey cleans up the aftermath.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Charlie,

I think the polite thing to do would be to thank you up front for the pickles (which were excellent as always, by the way) but I find myself too distracted by your impending mine expedition, and I need to get this out of the way. As your doctor, I'd strongly advise you not to go down there. It's been abandoned for years and may not be structurally sound, and is likely full of wild animals. I can't stop you if you really want to go, just...be safe, okay?

Now, with my medical duty fulfilled, I can talk about more interesting things...although I admit, I'm having a hard time thinking of any. The curse of my line of work is that I have some great stories, but I'm not allowed to tell anyone. Back in Zuzu I'd just anonymize the patient when I wanted to repeat something funny, but Pelican Town is so small, that's not really possible here. It's become such a die-hard habit I didn't even tell anyone but Maru about your dog, even though I'm not sure doctor-patient confidentiality extends beyond humans.

Speaking of non-humans, I haven't had much luck figuring out your childhood TNG crush. You say it's a common one, which makes me think either Riker or Troi? Was it one of those? I can't say I particularly had a crush on anyone, but I always related to Data. I wonder what it says about me that my favorite character was the naïve robot who didn't have feelings?

To answer your questions, the clinic hasn't been very busy. In the summer it's mostly just doling out aloe gel for sunburns. Your question about whether I'd gotten any sun actually made me laugh out loud, but I forget you haven't been through a summer here yet. My complexion only really shifts from "pale" to "translucent" throughout the year. In the winter you won't be able to look straight at me without those tinted ski goggles.

I know you're too busy for much else these days, but generally speaking, what do you do when you're not farming or watching old sci-fi TV shows?

Harvey

* * * * *

Charlie,

I thought it would be fun to write you a letter. I'm not sure why. Clearly this was a bad idea. I stole you some food from the back room at Joja. Don't starve.

Shane

* * * * *

Shane,

Aww, I miss you too. But you live WAY too close for you to be sending me food in the mail, and I still don't have a kitchen, as you know. Next time, heat it up and just come over. I'm busy, not dead.

I have beer.

Charlie

* * * * *

Dear Harvey,

You DID guess my TNG dreamboat! I won't tell you which one, though. A guy has to keep a little bit of mystery around him. As for your own favorite, I'd say less "naive robot with no feelings" and more "kind, rational guy with an inquisitive mind." Picard always did say Data was the most human of them all. (By the way, let me know when I eventually hit the limit of too geeky for you. I'm afraid I'm showing my nerd colors too early with all the Trek talk. If it helps, I can try to be cooler. I know some stuff about music and I think I saw a sport once. Sometimes I throw a stick for Bones, does that count as "sports"?)

What I do when I'm not farming...well, these days, that's pretty much it. I've probably bitten off more than I can chew with the chickens and the number of crops I'm growing, but I don't know. I still have this weird feeling that I have to prove myself as a Real Farmer, and I won't be one until I have a big field and a barn full of animals. Plus, I'd eventually like to expand this house beyond one room, and I spent all my money on

seeds. Seeds and Gus's food. Side note—how is a chef that good running a bar in Stardew Valley?

But other than that, I like music, I like books. I used to play the guitar a little, but I sold mine when I moved here—too much to lug with me. I probably should have donated all the books too, but sentimentality got the better of me. I couldn't leave behind my copy of Dune or my Vonnegut books, or Harry Potter. Or Hatchet, which I am aware is not for 28-year-old men, but it's a good book, okay?

I did give away The Grapes of Wrath, though. It seemed like a bad omen.

What about you, what are you into besides doctoring? Did you always want to be a doctor?

Charlie

P.S. I know I didn't answer you about the mines. That's because I've sort of already gone in? A couple of times? Don't worry, though, it seems totally safe. And it's like 40 degrees cooler in there than in my house. I might just start sleeping there.

* * * * *

Hey Mom,

I keep telling you, don't send me money! Seriously. I'm doing okay. I think I'll be in pretty good shape once my summer harvests get going. I'm getting the hang of this "growing stuff" thing. You wouldn't believe how tan I am.

I'm glad things are good with you. You know you can visit anytime, right? My house is tiny, but they have rooms at the Stardrop. You probably knew that, actually. It's weird, thinking about how much you know about this place. Probably more than me! Mayor Lewis says hi.

I'm working pretty much from sunrise until sunset these days, trying to get everything in the ground. The worst part of being so busy is that I haven't had a chance to visit any of my friends. It feels weird to write letters to someone who lives a mile away, but Harvey and I have been writing back and forth. It's kind of nice, having something to look forward to at the end of the day, when I'm covered in dirt and about to pass out.

Here's a picture of my chickens. I know I'm biased, but tell me straight: they're the cutest birds ever, right?

Love,

Charlie

* * * * *

Dear Charlie,

I'm honestly flattered that you think there's a point at which you would be "too geeky for me." I mentioned it to Maru and she laughed so hard and so long I almost sedated her. I feel like since you've shown your hand, I should show mine, but I admit I'm still a little nervous that I'll prove to be an even bigger nerd than you imagined. Since you say a man should keep some mystery around him, I'll take your word on that and keep my dorkiest hobbies under wraps for now.

Except for books, since you brought them up. I am a fairly voracious reader, although I tend to be buried in medical journals so I haven't branched out into fiction for a while. The last good books I read were the Magicians trilogy. Have you read those? There's nothing wrong with Hatchet. It's an excellent book, though I admit I skip the scary beginning bit with the plane crash.

You mention music—any chance you like jazz? If I'd been born a more creative person, I like to think I would have been a jazz musician. You actually share a name with one of my favorites, Charlie Parker. He's excellent company when I'm doing paperwork in my apartment.

For what it's worth, I don't believe you have to prove anything to anyone. You've gone after the work on your farm with passion and ambition, and I think that makes you a real farmer, if you don't mind me saying so. The temptation to do everything, right now, is probably very strong, but please remember to take care of yourself and enjoy the process of building something. That was what you said you set out to do when you left Joja, wasn't it—build something of substance?

I'm afraid I'm not very good at these kinds of pep talks. There was a reason Picard got the big speeches and not Data. But I'll leave you with some of the Captain's wisdom—maybe it will help. " Someone once told me that time was a predator that stalked us all our lives. I rather believe that time is a companion who goes with us on the journey and reminds us to cherish every moment, because it will never come again. What we leave behind is not as important as how we've lived. After all, Number One, we're only mortal."

Your friend,

Harvey

P.S. I'm going to pretend I didn't read your last postscript.

* * * * *

The mines, as it turned out, weren't totally safe.

Charlie cursed himself, the town, the people *in* the town, his grandfather for bringing him *to* the town, and a few assorted deities just for good measure. Yes, he had been foolhardy. Yes, he had been warned to stay out of the mines. But in his defense, he hadn't believed there were *actual, literal monsters* down there. Who, over the age of ten, would? Except everyone in Pelican Town, apparently, because they'd been totally right.

The bugs had appeared first, and they hadn't rattled him much. Sure, they were big, but they were just bugs. A quick thwack with a wooden board he'd found lying around, and they were more or less jelly. The weird mole things had startled him a bit more, because as far as he knew, moles didn't go out of their way to find and attack humans. When he thought about it later, he actually laughed about the role reversal—maybe it was just revenge for all those Whack-a-Mole arcade games?

The slimes had freaked him right out, though. Nowhere in his mental database of wild animals could he find a moving, breathing ball of goo with eyes. It hadn't seemed very dangerous, and so he'd let his guard down a little, and then it had launched at him. And so had all of its friends. He'd barely managed to escape back up the ladder, swinging the board wildly and wishing he'd brought some kind of weapon with him. *A weapon? Are you the farm version of Indiana Jones now?*

Charlie was exhausted, filthy, covered in bug guts, and on top of it all had discovered that the slimes *burned.* He still didn't really know what they were made of, but it clearly involved some kind of acid not meant to contact human skin. They'd dissolved through the legs of his favorite jeans like Swiss cheese, searing the flesh underneath and leaving agonizing red circles all over his calves. For about three seconds after he'd gotten out of the mine, he'd considered going home to treat them himself, then decided it was a job for a professional. How did a person even treat acid burns, anyway?

As he limped out of the mountains and toward the clinic, Charlie braced himself for Harvey's inevitable *I-told-you-so.* The doctor had warned him, just like everyone else, but unlike everyone else Harvey would have to clean up the aftermath. Charlie felt stupid, and angry, and painful, and he didn't really have the energy for a lecture. He'd actually been looking forward to going home and answering Harvey's latest letter, his favorite yet. It had brought a lump to his throat, reading those words directed at him. Harvey was wrong; he really *was* good at pep talks.

The clinic was closed, of course; it was late evening, long past most businesses' operating hours. But Charlie knew Harvey lived in the apartment above, and hoped he wasn't an early-to-bed type. Gritting his teeth and hoping he wasn't about to be inundated with concerned neighbors, Charlie raised a fist and pounded on the door.

The first volley of knocks did nothing, and neither did the second. But shortly after the third, Charlie heard distinct sounds of scurrying from inside, punctuated with a *"Just a minute!"* He sighed in relief and leaned against the doorframe, desperate to take the pressure off his aching legs. A moment later, he heard the locks clicking open, and the door swung open to reveal a surprised-looking Harvey in his pajamas.

“Charlie! This is a pleasant surprise, what brings you— *oh!* Yoba, what happened?”

“The mines,” Charlie said heavily, rubbing a hand over his face. “I know it’s after hours, but do you have time for a quick patch-up?”

“Of course, come in, come in.” Harvey hustled down the hall to the exam room, flicking lights on as he went; Charlie followed more slowly, dropping his goo-encrusted backpack in the waiting room. As he approached, Harvey pulled on a pair of nitrile gloves, arranging a few instruments on the tray beside the exam table. He looked oddly out-of-place in his relaxing clothes; the gloves were a strange contrast to his T-shirt and well-worn flannel pajama pants. Charlie realized he’d never actually seen him out of his “doctor clothes” before. He looked younger without the tie.

“I see your legs are wounded,” Harvey said, getting to the point. “Any other injuries?”

“Not really, just that. Some kind of slime thing, it burned me.”

“Okay. We’ll take a look at it.” He pulled a curtain across the other side of the room, gesturing to it and picking up his clipboard. “You can go behind there and just take off your shoes and, um, pants. You can leave your underwear on.”

Charlie moved behind the curtain and did as he said, suddenly glad for the distraction of the searing pain in his legs. His crush on Harvey hadn’t lessened by keeping away; in fact, if anything, it had only gotten stronger. He knew their correspondence had gotten too personal, but he couldn’t help himself. Harvey was fun to talk to, and the warmth and intelligence of his letters gave Charlie something to look forward to at the end of another exhausting day. He’d managed to convince himself during his absence that Harvey wasn't as cute as he remembered, but unfortunately, reality had come rushing back to him as soon as the man had opened the door.

Perching himself on the edge of the table, he called Harvey back into the room. The doctor visibly winced at the sight of his legs, pulling up a stool to get a closer look.

“These look very painful, Charlie,” he said, shining a penlight over one of the tennis-ball-sized burns. “Does it hurt when I touch them?”

“AH— *yeah,”* Charlie hissed, and Harvey threw him an apologetic look.

“I’ve heard about the slimes, although I haven’t encountered one personally. These burns look similar, chemically speaking, to those caused by a weak sulfuric acid solution.”

“Doesn’t feel so weak to me.”

Harvey gave him a pained little smile. “Well, the fact that you can still feel it at all means it’s pretty weak, but I know what you mean.” He stood up, pushing his stool back from the table. “Those burns need to be rinsed *very* thoroughly before we do anything else. Can you walk a short distance?”

“Sure. Where are we going?”

Harvey sighed, glancing at the ceiling. “Well, it’s not very professional, but the clinic isn’t really equipped for burns this big. If you’re not opposed, the quickest course of action would be to take a long, cold shower.”

“In your apartment?”

“If you’re uncomfortable, I’ll arrange emergency transport to the city, of course.”

“No, thanks.” Charlie hopped awkwardly to his feet, hobbling toward the door. “You’re sure you don’t mind me rinsing off slime goop in your shower?”

Harvey’s face went a little pink, and he scrubbed a hand through his hair. “No, as long as you promise not to judge me for my apartment?”

Charlie actually stopped in his tracks, staring at him. “Harvey,” he said incredulously, “I live in a glorified shed. You’ve *been* there. I’m going to judge *you?”*

“Okay, okay,” Harvey conceded, holding up his hands as he started up the stairs. Charlie followed, suddenly very curious. What *did* Harvey’s place look like, and why would he be worried about Charlie’s judgment? Somehow, Charlie couldn’t picture him as one of those slobby bachelor types who just left stuff strewn everywhere. Maybe it was still one of those bleak post-college apartments, where everything was chipped IKEA hand-me-downs and there was nothing on the walls?

Harvey pushed open the door to his apartment and stepped through, radiating waves of nervousness that Charlie couldn’t decipher. It wasn't immediately obvious what Harvey had been worried about; it was a small apartment, sure, but a cozy and tidy one. The furniture wasn't especially stylish, but it seemed to be of good quality and everything was well-kept. It took Charlie ten seconds of standing stupidly in the doorway before he noticed the planes. One whole corner of the studio was devoted to shelf after shelf of model airplanes, and the walls around them were plastered in plane-related art: schematics, photos, and what looked like a chart of aviation lingo. A desk below them held a complicated-looking radio with a microphone, which Charlie assumed had to be a CB, or what was the other name for it? Ham radio? Another model plane was in progress, scattered across Harvey’s kitchen table as though Charlie had interrupted him in the middle of building it—which he probably had.

The mystery of Harvey’s last letter clicked into place. “So *that’s* what kind of nerd you are!” he exclaimed, grinning. “It all makes sense now, although I gotta say, I never thought of model planes. I was thinking more along the lines of LARPing or being super into the Solarian Chronicles or something.”

Harvey gave a tight smile, his hands thrust into his pockets, and Charlie realized he was genuinely embarrassed. “Hey,” Charlie said gently, and Harvey looked at him across his face. “You’ve got nothing to worry about. I think it’s cool.” Harvey audibly scoffed, and Charlie took a step toward him. “I mean it! I like people who are passionate about something. It’s refreshing; everybody’s always trying so hard to pretend they don’t care about anything.” He gestured toward the shelves of models. “Did you build all those?”

Harvey's shoulders had loosened ever so slightly, and he nodded. "I did. That's...mostly what I do when I'm not doctoring, as you put it."

Charlie's legs gave a throb of anger at having been ignored this long, and he sucked a breath in through his teeth. "Unfortunately I need to take a shower, but when I get out, I want to hear more about those," he said, wincing. Harvey jumped as though he'd been scalded, rushing to the bathroom door to open it.

"Yoba, I'm a terrible doctor," he said. "Go ahead, there are clean towels hanging up. Remember, it needs to be *cold.* You only need to get your legs wet, though. Don't use soap or anything."

"Got it, doc." It took Charlie a few minutes to figure out the logistics of the shower; how could he rinse his legs without getting the rest of him under the freezing spray? Despite his best efforts, he couldn't make it work without getting water all over Harvey's bathroom, and so in the end he gritted his teeth and just stood under the water. Instantly, though the rest of his skin erupted in goosebumps, his legs felt a blissful relief. The constant heat that had plagued him for the last hour died away, and he tilted his head back, savoring it.

It turned out to be a good thing that he'd gone all-in on the cold shower, because once the pain in his legs was gone, he couldn't stop thinking about the fact that this was *Harvey's shower.* Harvey stood here every day, naked. Naked and *wet.* The mental images couldn't be stopped, but at least the frigid downpour could stop his traitorous body from responding. Giving in to curiosity, he opened the bottle of shampoo and took a whiff. Rosemary and mint —was that what Harvey's hair smelled like?

He shut the bottle with a snap, suddenly cringing at his own behavior. Harvey was letting him use his shower as a *medical professional,* and Charlie was making it creepy. How long had he been standing in here? Probably more than long enough, right? He reached for a towel and shut off the water, and then promptly screamed.

"Yes, it's going to feel worse without the water running," came Harvey's muffled voice through the door. "Get dressed as quickly as you can, and we'll go back downstairs and fix it."

Charlie struggled back into his boxer briefs and shirt, not even bothering to button it or dry his hair before barreling out of the bathroom. Harvey had changed back into a button-down shirt and pants, though he hadn't put his tie or jacket on. "Doing okay?" he asked, gesturing toward the door to the clinic.

"Fuck, fuck, *ow,"* Charlie hissed in lieu of an answer, and Harvey gave him a look of sympathy as they headed downstairs.

"I have a basic solution that should neutralize what's left of the acid, and then I'll give you some painkillers. The hard part's almost over."

"I'll take your word for it." Back in the exam room, Charlie climbed onto the table with more difficulty, while Harvey bustled around gathering supplies. He took a moment to look back on his fantasies of being treated by Harvey; somehow, searing pain had never factored into

them. He'd imagined a treatment for something *sexy,* like maybe a minor bicep-flexing injury. Still, he was nearly naked, and Harvey was sitting down at eye level with his pelvis. When Harvey slid a gloved hand around the back of his knee and began swabbing a soothing liquid over his burns, Charlie let out an involuntary groan that he hoped didn't sound too pornographic.

"Told you it would help," Harvey remarked, clearly fighting back a smile, but Charlie didn't care. The pain in his legs was receding as Harvey worked, and without the agony occupying his mind, he was free to focus on Harvey: the gentle motions of his hands, the look of concentration on his face behind his slightly smudged glasses. They slid down his nose a little, and Charlie fought an absurd impulse to push them back up.

"What's that symbol on the wall?" he asked, to distract himself. There was a small gold plaque hanging nearby; he'd seen it in a few other places around town, but never knew what it meant. Harvey spared it a glance as he worked.

"Ah. It's a Mark of Yoba."

"That...god? Deity? Whatever?"

"That's the one."

Charlie had wondered about this for a while. "What's Yoba's story? Or deal, or whatever? I don't really know anything about it, except that everyone around here worships...it?"

Harvey chuckled. "Neither do I," he said, cracking a smile. "Nobody's ever told me. Lewis just asked me if I wanted to convert a few months after I moved here, and I agreed."

"Just like that?"

"I was never very religious in the first place, and I thought it might make the villagers more comfortable coming to the clinic. The hardest part was training myself to say 'Yoba' instead of 'God,' but I hardly ever slip up anymore." He leaned in closer, angling his head to look at the back of Charlie's leg. "Can you lift your calf a little for me?"

They sat in silence for a few minutes, Harvey working away and Charlie trying to think about anything other than the position they were in. He knew it was very late by now, but the receding adrenaline had left him wide awake. Harvey finished up with the solution, reaching for a roll of gauze he'd left on the tray.

"I can't bandage them too tightly, because we want air to flow through, but you need to keep them covered for now so they don't get infected," he explained, beginning to wrap the gauze around Charlie's right calf. "You'll need to change the dressings every day, until scabs form. After that, you can let them air out. Can you change them yourself, do you think?"

"Definitely," Charlie said quickly. He didn't need Harvey handling his increasingly scabby legs any more than he had to. The silence fell again, only the soft sounds of the brushing gauze filling the room. At last, Charlie thought of something to say.

“Thanks for writing me back,” he said quietly. Harvey looked up at him, his expression unreadable. “I was starting to get pretty lonely out there. It...helped.”

Harvey blinked, his hand resting on the side of Charlie’s foot; the warmth seeped into his skin, and suddenly he realized how cold the rest of him was. He hadn’t noticed through the burning pain in his legs, but he’d just stepped out of a frigid shower, it made sense that he would be chilled. Harvey noticed his sudden shiver and stood abruptly, turning toward a cabinet.

“What is *wrong* with me tonight? Of course you’re cold!”

“In your defense, my screaming was probably pretty distracting,” Charlie joked through chattering teeth. Harvey emerged from the cabinet with a blanket, shaking the folds out. Charlie reached for it, but before he could take it, Harvey swept it around his shoulders and tucked the sides together in front of his chest. Charlie nearly swooned, both from the sudden warmth and the shamefully delightful feeling of having Harvey take care of him. Satisfied that Charlie wasn't going to freeze, Harvey settled back onto his stool, finishing up with the wrappings. Charlie thought his remark about the letters had been forgotten in the hubbub, but after a moment, Harvey spoke.

“I was happy to see your letters in my inbox,” he said, to the general area of Charlie’s knees. He paused for a long moment, then took a deep breath, ventured a small smile at Charlie, and added, “I’m happier to see you, though.”

Charlie smiled back at him, feeling warmed through, and Harvey turned pink and went back to his work. *God,* Harvey needed to cut it out with the cute/bashful thing, because Charlie wasn't going to survive otherwise. It was as though Harvey was reading out of a manual of how to make him weak in the knees. “I’m sorry I’ve been away for so long,” Charlie said at last.

“It’s okay,” Harvey replied, finishing with the last bandage and tucking in the end. “I know you’re busy. It gets that way for me at the beginning of fall, and basically all winter. Probably right when you’ll have free time.” He smiled up at Charlie again, seeming more at ease now. “Too bad.”

“It was nice knowing you,” Charlie agreed, laughing softly. Harvey finally pushed back from the table, rising from his stool and beginning to drop tools into the sink. Charlie instantly felt useless. “Can I help with anything?”

“No, no, don’t worry about it. Just rest your legs for a moment, and then I’ll get you some painkillers for the road.”

“You’re the best.” Something else occurred to him, and he fidgeted with the edge of a bandage. “You haven’t even given me trouble for ignoring your advice.”

Harvey shrugged, tossing the soaked cotton balls in the trash. “It was advice,” he said simply, “not orders. I can’t tell you what to do.”

“Well, you were right. Thanks for not being sanctimonious about it.” Charlie stood, stretching; he felt ancient and creaky after his disastrous evening. Harvey had finished tidying up, and went to rummage through a high cabinet.

“I’m going to give you some serious ibuprofen, okay? Make sure you eat first, and don’t take more than one every six hours. If it gets to the point that you really can’t stand it, come back and I’ll give you something else. It’s better to start off with non-narcotics, though.” He closed the cabinet and returned to Charlie, holding out the bottle.

“Sounds great. Thank you so much, Harvey. One of these days I’m going to do *you* a favor, I promise.”

Harvey laughed, running a hand through his hair again. “I think the number of empty pickle jars in my apartment probably add up to a pretty big favor,” he said, and then broke into an enormous yawn. “Whoops, sorry.”

“Don’t be. It’s late. I’m sorry to have kept you up so long past your bedtime.” Charlie knew it *was* late, but he found himself strangely reluctant to go. He picked up the tattered remnants of his jeans, eyeing them critically. “I don’t think these are going to do me a lot of good for the walk home, though.”

“Oh! Here.” Harvey picked up a pair of scrub pants he’d left folded on the counter, holding them out with an apologetic look. “They’re not exactly a fashion statement, but they’re light and loose, which is what you need right now.”

“Ah, thanks.” Wincing, he stepped slowly into the pants. They were too long by a mile, but they were indeed light, and didn’t aggravate his angry legs too much. When he straightened again, Harvey was looking at the floor.

“So, um,” he said, and Charlie’s ears pricked up at the nervousness that had crept back into his tone. “Do you think you can make it back to the farm on your own? Or do you need help? If you’re too sore, you don’t even have to go home, you can stay here. In the OR,” he added, a bit hastily. “There are beds in there.”

Charlie was tempted by the offer of a walk home, he really was. But Harvey looked exhausted, dark circles starting under his eyes, and Charlie didn’t want to put him through even more strain just to satisfy his silly crush. “I think I’m good,” he said, and instantly wished he hadn’t; rather than relieved, Harvey looked unmistakably disappointed.

“Ah,” he said. “Good. Well...take it easy, okay? I know it’s no use telling you not to work in the fields, but make sure you at least stay hydrated and take breaks. And keep the sun off those burns.”

“Will do, doc. I’ll see you soon.”

“I hope so. Maybe not under these circumstances.”

They made their way to the door of the clinic so Harvey could lock up behind Charlie, exchanging a few words of farewell. Once Charlie was safely outside with his backpack on

his shoulders, he let out a deep breath, his eyes sliding closed. Honestly, there was nothing he wanted to do less than walk for half an hour, but he had to get home to make sure the animals were taken care of. Thinking longingly of the bicycle he'd had to leave in the entrance of the mines, he set out toward home. Damn, he hadn't even asked Harvey about his model airplanes.

It was endearing, how worried he was that Charlie might judge him, but it also made Charlie sad. Had he been teased about it in the past? Maybe by Philip, who Charlie had begun picturing as a sort of amalgam of terrible ex-boyfriend stereotypes? The planes weren't really Charlie's thing, but he hadn't been lying, he *did* appreciate someone with passion. He had once dumped a gorgeous blonde with all the interests of a cardboard cutout; he'd once crushed pretty hard on an average-looking guy whose all-consuming love for painting had transformed him into something extraordinary. Charlie resolved to get Harvey talking about his love of aviation, to ease his self-consciousness about it. Maybe it would actually turn out to be super interesting.

As he started down the road toward his farm, he cast one last glance back at the town square. The little rectangle of Harvey's apartment window was still illuminated; he hadn't gone to bed yet. Maybe he *was* a fellow night owl. Feeling somehow cheered that he wasn't the only one still awake, Charlie hitched his backpack further up onto his shoulders, settling in for the long walk home.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks so much for your comments, kudos, and just for being here! After working on this totally alone for almost two years, it feels really nice to start sharing it :) Hope you're staying safe and healthy out there!

Chapter 7: Summer, Year 1

Chapter Summary

Sandwiches are made. The Luau is attended. Pasts are discussed.

"Harvey, we have been *over* this. It just isn't my thing."

"But they're so good! I don't understand how you can be fine with science fiction, but not with fantasy. It doesn't make any sense."

"No, what makes no sense is that people keep lumping those two in the same category just because they're both popular with nerds." Maru sighed heavily, and Harvey knew the battle was already lost, despite his best efforts. "Sci-fi is *speculative.* It *could* happen, it just hasn't yet. Fantasy is just made-up. Honestly, I'm surprised someone with a mind as scientific as yours is so willing to read that garbage."

"I'm surprised someone with a mind as *brilliant* as yours has so little imagination," Harvey retorted, and then immediately dodged the wad of paper Maru threw at his head. His worn copy of Lev Grossman's *The Magicians* lay on the counter between them, the source of their debate—not for the first time. He just wanted *someone* in this town to read a book he liked, so he could talk about it with them. He'd actually considered starting a book club, but he doubted his taste in literature would mesh well with the only other bookworms he knew of in town (Penny, who he usually saw toting around 19th-century British literature, and Jodi, Gus and Caroline, who seemed to favor books that made them cry). He'd seen Sebastian and Abigail reading *A Song of Ice and Fire* books now and again, but his attempts to start a conversation had been met with one-word answers, so he'd given up.

"I have plenty of imagination, thanks. I just choose to spend it on inventions. Go bother Charlie with your wizards and wands, I'm sure he'd be interested."

Harvey picked the book up, struggling to let it go. He tried his best, but pedantry won out, and be blurted, "They actually don't use wands in this series, it's just—"

"Yoba, *go away,"* Maru groaned, and Harvey did, deciding maybe a walk would do him some good. The last three days had been stormy, but today was clear, and considerably cooler than it had been before the rain. As he stood in the square, stretching a little, a familiar voice from his right nearly made him drop his book.

"Are you wearing sun protection? Somebody told me the skin is our largest organ and shouldn't be neglected," called Charlie, and Harvey fought down the grin that attempted to take over his face. He turned to see Charlie striding toward him across the square, a little

stiffly perhaps, but none the worse for wear. Harvey had to stifle a laugh at his outfit: he had apparently hacked the ruined legs off his jeans just above the knee, and not very evenly.

“You can’t borrow them, just so you know,” he added, smirking, and Harvey finally let the laugh out.

“Damn,” he said, “and here I was just thinking how professional they’d make me look.”

“Turns out when you dig around in the dirt all day, pretty much any clothes are professional.” Charlie stopped beside him and smiled, nodding down at his book. *“The Magicians.* That’s the one you mentioned in your letter, right?”

Harvey felt a flush of pleasure that Charlie had remembered anything he’d written. “It is. It’s very good, although Maru doesn’t believe me.”

“Too geeky for her?”

“Wrong *kind* of geeky.”

“Ah. Well, if you say it’s good, I trust your judgment. I’ll have to see if the library has it.” Charlie smiled, and Harvey seized his opportunity.

“Why don’t you just take mine?” he offered, holding it out. “I’ve got all three, just bring it back when you’re done and I’ll give you the sequel.”

“Oh, well if you’re sure…” Charlie took the book, tucking it carefully into his backpack. While he zipped it back up, Harvey stole a glance at his legs. The bandages were inexpertly wrapped, but looked new and clean; he couldn’t see any red flags for infection, at least not at a distance.

“Are you just in town running some errands?” he asked. Charlie finished with his backpack and turned back to him, the corners of his mouth turned up.

“I came to see you, actually,” he said, and Harvey’s heart leapt into overdrive. *To see me?* “If you have a sec, I wondered if you could check my legs and let me know if I’m cleared to start leaving the bandages off. They’re driving me nuts.”

A doctor visit. Of course. “Oh.”

“And then I thought I’d buy you lunch as a thank-you for fixing me up after hours the other night,” he added, his smile widening. Harvey cursed himself for being so transparent.

“Oh?”

They made their way back into the clinic, Harvey determinedly ignoring Maru’s knowing smirk at the lack of a book in his hand. Charlie made small talk about the farm and the weather while Harvey carefully unwrapped his legs. He’d been taking good care of them; they weren’t healing as quickly as they could if he stayed out of the heat, but they weren’t infected, either. The progress was better than he’d feared, since Charlie had a worrying tendency not to take care of himself.

“Let me just get a couple of vitals, if that’s okay,” Harvey said, taking the stethoscope from around his neck. “I should’ve gotten them the other night, but I was trying to get you in bed. Home! Home and to bed,” he stammered, mentally kicking himself.

“Oh, uh, sure,” Charlie agreed. Harvey stood and leaned forward, sliding the stethoscope under the collar of Charlie’s shirt and trying desperately not to think about sun-tanned pectoral muscles. The thought was driven from his mind, though, by the unexpected speed of Charlie’s heart rate.

“Hmm...your pulse is high,” he commented, squinting as he listened for any subtle arrhythmias. Did Charlie have a heart problem? It was too high for the resting rate of a man under 30 in good health—

“I’m just a little nervous,” Charlie said, echoing strangely through the stethoscope.

“Oh, do medical situations bother you?” He hadn’t gotten that impression the other night, but then, Charlie had been in terrible pain. Maybe his nervousness had taken a back seat.

“No, not usually,” Charlie muttered, almost as though he were talking to himself. Harvey felt, if anything, more confused. But it wasn’t a doctor’s job to pry, and Charlie didn’t seem keen on offering more information, so Harvey let it go.

“You’re cleared to be bandage-free,” he declared, sitting back and stripping off his gloves. Charlie let out a sigh of relief, leaning back on his hands. “Just be careful not to get dirt in your wounds; they could still get infected. And *don’t* let them sunburn.”

“Yes, sir,” Charlie intoned, and that probably shouldn’t have interested Harvey as much as it did. He coughed, trying to cover the little shake he gave his head to clear it. “I didn’t think this through very well. I was going to suggest we go to the Stardrop, but I think I’m pretty unappetizing to look at right now.” He kicked his feet up to illustrate, scowling at his scabby legs. Privately, Harvey agreed the cutoff jorts and huge red scabs weren’t a great look—but they were still attached to the rest of Charlie, who would never be unappetizing to him.

“It’s definitely a step down from Gus,” Harvey began tentatively, “but I was going to make a sandwich for lunch. I could make two, and we could go eat outside somewhere…?”

Charlie sighed good-naturedly, rubbing a hand over his face. “How did this turn into *you* doing *me* another favor?”

“Read that book and talk to me about it. That’s at least six favors right there.”

“Deal.”

Harvey left Charlie down in the waiting room to talk to Maru while he made sandwiches, wishing he had something more interesting to offer for lunch—but honestly, it was a miracle he even *had* food in his apartment at all. Throwing the food and a few cans of fizzy water in a bag, he headed back downstairs to collect his lunch date *(not a date, not a date, stop it).*
“Ready?”

“I’ll just hold down the fort here, don’t worry about me,” Maru called after them as they left, and Harvey threw her a withering look over his shoulder.

Out in the sunshine, Charlie squinted around the square. “Were you thinking of any place in particular?”

“Well, we can go wherever you want, but...I usually eat by the fountain on nice days.”

“Good call.” Charlie set off in that direction, and Harvey followed, feeling suddenly awkward. They’d talked easily the night Charlie had come into the clinic, but Harvey had been focused on his work; he hadn’t had to worry about where to look or what to do with his hands, or his constant fear that he’d let something casually slip out about how badly he wanted to kiss Charlie into the middle of next week. He supposed he could always fall back on medical advice—it was boring, but it would break the silence.

“Have you been taking care of yourself? Sleeping and hydrating enough?”

“God, no,” Charlie replied, laughing. “Sorry, doc, but you’re going to have to give up on *that* question. I’m a lost cause.”

“Well, as long as you stay out of monster-infested mines.” He chuckled, but Charlie didn’t; turning to look at him, he saw that the farmer was carefully avoiding his gaze. “You *aren’t* going back in there, are you?”

Charlie hedged, biting his lip. Harvey tried valiantly not to get distracted by this. “Well…”

Realization struck Harvey like a train. “You already have! Charlie!”

“It was raining yesterday! I didn’t have anything to do around the farm, and anyway I had to go back for the stuff I dropped last time.” He jerked a thumb at his backpack. “Don’t worry, I came prepared this time. That weird guy Marlon sold me a club.”

Harvey gaped at him, his indignation forgotten. “A club?”

“Or maybe it’s a mace? I don’t really know my blunt objects. It’s long and heavy and slimes pop when you hit them with it.”

Harvey felt dazed, almost walking into the fountain in his distracted state. Once he’d dropped onto the bench, he took off his glasses to clean them on his shirt—a flustered habit Maru had pointed out, but one he didn’t seem to be able to stop. “Charlie,” he said slowly, “I’m pretty sure Marlon and those other guys—the Adventurers’ Guild, or whatever they call themselves—they’re just really intense roleplayers. The Valley’s version of civil war reenactors.”

Charlie dug into the bag, extracting his drink and sandwich with a shake of his head. “No, they’re definitely serious. I mean, it doesn’t seem like they actually *do* anything, but they keep a tally on the wall of all the monsters they’ve killed, supposedly. And *man* have they got a lot of weapons stashed in that clubhouse.” He took a bite of his sandwich, making an appreciative noise. “Thanks for this, Harvey, I’m starving.”

Maybe it *was* time for a change of subject; Harvey wasn't sure how he could talk about this any longer without losing his mind. The mine was full of monsters, and that group of weird old men in the mountains were hunting them. Charlie had a medieval weapon and possibly a fetish for danger. It was a lot to think about. “You’re welcome.”

“Although, come to think of it, we probably should have eaten back at your apartment. So you could tell me about your planes?” he added, seeing Harvey’s confusion. Harvey felt his eyebrows shoot up.

“Oh! I, uh...ha, you know, I thought you were just being polite,” he confessed, running his fingers through his hair. “You actually wanted to see them?”

Charlie tilted his head a little, looking curious. “Well, yeah,” he said, as though it should have been obvious. “You’re so into them, I wanted to know more. Why planes, anyway?” He went back to his sandwich, breaking eye contact, which let Harvey breathe a little easier. How deep should he get into this? How much did Charlie really want to know? He remembered the conversation about Philip, how Charlie had seemed genuinely pleased to know more about Harvey’s past, and decided to venture just a little bit more.

“I always wanted to be a pilot,” he began, picking at his sandwich. “Turns out you can’t do that with terrible vision...or a crippling fear of heights.” His mouth twisted up in an ironic smile. He’d stopped being depressed about it years ago, but it was still a little hard to talk about.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Charlie said, looking as though he meant it. “Why did you want to be a pilot if you’re afraid of heights, though?”

“The short answer? Freedom.” He sat back, tilting his face up to feel the sunshine. “I, well, I didn’t have the happiest childhood, and. I was always envious of people who could just fly off into the sunset. I thought I could get past the fear, and maybe I could have...but it’s tough to get past eyesight as bad as mine.”

He ventured a glance at Charlie, who gazed at him, an unreadable expression on his face. “I’m sorry. I feel like I’m always prying into something you might not want to talk about,” he said. Harvey shook his head, the corner of his mustache quirking up ruefully.

“It isn’t your fault. My past is mostly sort of an unhappy one, I suppose.”

“You don’t have to relive it if you don’t want to,” Charlie said gently, looking down at the bench between them. Harvey found himself mesmerized by the way the sunlight glinted off the golden strands in his hair, the graceful curve of his bent neck. “But for what it’s worth, I’d like to hear whatever you want to tell me.”

Harvey struggled. He *wanted* to tell Charlie about his life, he realized. He wanted the intimacy that came from really knowing someone, from seeing them and being seen. On the other hand, their friendship—if that was how Charlie thought of it—was still so new, Harvey worried about putting too much weight on it. The last thing he wanted was for Charlie to think of him as a sad old man.

He decided to keep the details to himself for now. “Another time,” he suggested, giving a quick little smile. “It’s a beautiful day, and I’d hate to ruin it with all that. I’ll tell you later.”

“On a really gross day when we’re already in a bad mood?” Charlie joked, and if he was disappointed, he hid it well. Harvey nodded, relieved he’d let it go so easily.

“Absolutely.”

“I look forward to it.” Charlie took another bite of sandwich, chewing thoughtfully. “So. Do you actually like being a doctor, then?”

“Oh, yes.” Harvey picked his own sandwich back up; he was going to starve before he finished monologuing, if he wasn't careful. “Not everyone’s dreams come true. That doesn’t mean that what you get instead is necessarily bad, or wrong for you. I mean, did you dream of being a farmer?”

Charlie outright laughed at this, covering his mouth with his hand. “Oh, God, no. This is definitely a weird left turn.”

“But you’re happy here, right?” For the first time, it occurred to him that Charlie might not be. *Yoba, please let him say yes. He can’t go back to the city, not now.*

To his immense relief, Charlie nodded, looking at Harvey over his can with warmth in his eyes. “I am. It’s been a big change, but...I actually really like the work, and this town.”

“Does it feel like home?”

Charlie’s eyes hadn’t moved from Harvey’s face, and he tried not to read anything into that. It was difficult, particularly when Charlie responded without looking away, “It’s starting to.”

In the end it was Harvey who had to look away; holding Charlie’s gaze was like looking directly into the sun, and he felt too exposed. He tried for a slight change of topic. “If not a farmer, what did you actually want to be?”

It worked. “Oh, you can probably guess that one,” he grinned. “I wanted to be a captain in Starfleet. Didn’t have to be the Enterprise, necessarily, as long as I got my own ship.”

“Why on Earth did I go with ‘pilot’?” Harvey asked in mock regret. “Obviously I should have thought bigger. Maybe I could have been your first officer.”

“It’s not too late,” Charlie insisted. “Space travel gets more advanced all the time. There’s hope for us yet, Number One.”

Of all the endearments Harvey had imagined being called by Charlie, that one had never crossed his mind, but he felt absurdly pleased all the same. “You’ve got a point.” Something occurred to him, something he’d wanted to ask Charlie for weeks. “You said you went to business school, didn’t you? What made you choose that? Please don’t take this the wrong way, but you don’t seem the type, really.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment, thank you.” For the first time, Charlie looked uncomfortable, and Harvey began to regret asking. Was *he* prying now? But after a long drink of his water, Charlie answered. “I didn’t really choose it. My dad was an executive at a telecommunications company, and he pushed me really hard to follow in his footsteps. I...didn’t have any better ideas, to be honest,” he said sheepishly, glancing up at Harvey beneath his eyebrows. “He died before I even started college, so I could have done whatever, I guess. But...it was easier, in some ways, just to do what I’d been told.”

“I’m sorry,” Harvey said, feeling the statement inadequate. Charlie waved a hand dismissively.

“We weren’t close,” he said, shrugging. “He was more married to his job than anything else, really. I never wanted that for myself, I’m not sure why I stayed the course for as long as I did.” He smiled crookedly. “I’m glad to have finally made my own decision. It’s not exactly a starship, but at least I’m sort of the captain, I guess?”

“Definitely. Did the farm belong to your father’s father, or—”

“No, no way. That was my mom’s dad. She grew up here, met my dad when she went away for college.” Charlie popped the last of his sandwich into his mouth, raising a conspiratorial eyebrow. “Actually, my dad would have *hated* for me to end up here. Just between us, that might have been a tiny bit of the appeal.”

Harvey laughed at this, feeling the mood lighten a little. “It’s okay if it was more than a tiny bit,” he assured Charlie. “I won’t tell anyone that you’re raising chickens out of spite.”

“Much appreciated.” They’d both finished their food now, and Harvey knew there was no reason to keep lingering around the fountain together; Charlie would want to get back to work, surely. Still, it was the longest they’d ever spent together without an injury involved, and Harvey was loathe to say his goodbyes. He’d just resigned himself to heading back to the clinic, working up to wishing Charlie a nice day, when Charlie leaned back on the bench and crossed one leg over his knee as though he had nowhere else to be in the world.

“So,” he began brightly, “tell me what this magician book is actually about?”

* * * * *

After the intense pressure of the Flower Dance, Charlie had been a bit leery of the Luau. It seemed too close in theme: an outdoor dance, this time with a VIP attendee (the governor, who Charlie didn’t really care about but Lewis seemed desperate to impress). He’d been instructed by a letter from Lewis to bring something to add to the potluck soup. Then, a few days later, Lewis had cornered him at Pierre’s and upgraded it to “something *good.”* The day before the festival, the mayor had actually dropped by the farm and more or less begged him to bring the best produce he had. Charlie had recently started growing mushrooms in the cave on his property—Demetrius had come and set it up, something about monitoring the environmental conditions, Charlie had tuned out after *you can sell the mushrooms—* and so he’d set aside a fistful of the best-looking chanterelles and morels for the soup.

Actually, the event hadn't been bad at all. The governor turned out to be a friendly guy, not the oily, starchy bureaucrat Charlie had pictured. The soup had been very good and the governor had complimented it, although Charlie noticed that Lewis didn't look entirely happy. As per usual, all of Gus's food was delicious, and the dancing was strictly voluntary—most of the day, the dance floor was dominated by married couples and by Emily, dancing blissfully on her own. Charlie had no idea if she was drunk or just being her slightly odd self, but he supported her either way.

He knew he'd been a bit antisocial lately, what with the rush to get summer crops in and his injuries, so he took the opportunity to actually talk to his neighbors. Abigail, Sebastian and Sam perched on the end of the dock, passing around a cigarette (at least it *looked* like a cigarette, though Charlie wasn't sure it smelled like one). Elliott and Leah kept inching closer to the door of his cabin, and Charlie got the distinct impression they wanted everyone to go home. He made small talk with Clint for a while about his newfound weapon proficiency, and it was nice to hear the blacksmith talk about something other than Emily or his aches and pains for once.

"I think it might be easier to take out slimes with something sharper," Clint was saying.

"Yeah, I think so too," Charlie said as he poured himself another drink, "but then I'd be carrying a *literal sword* around. Like, how deep into this Tomb Raider roleplay do I want to get?"

"You are literally fighting monsters in an underground cave, though," Clint pointed out. "Aren't you kind of past roleplaying at this point?"

"You're not wrong there."

He drifted over to talk seeds with Pierre, who had a lot of ideas for what Charlie should plant during the fall. Charlie wished he liked Pierre more; the man was friendly enough, but he was so *salesy,* always managing to turn any conversation back to the store. It was too bad he hated Joja so much, Charlie thought, because he was a pretty natural fit for their style of business. Caroline wasn't much better—it was obvious that she disapproved of Abigail's relationship *(relationship?)* with Sebastian, and kept trying to push her at Charlie. He felt a little indignant on Abigail's behalf. Aside from the fact that he ran a farm, Caroline didn't know *anything* about Charlie—the entire thing could have been a front for the mob, as far as she knew. But from his few conversations with Sebastian, Charlie had picked up the feeling that he was desperate to get out of Pelican Town, so maybe Caroline was equally desperate for her daughter to find a reason to stay. (Charlie thought Caroline probably needed to worry a little bit more about Abigail's interest in swordfighting than her interest in Sebastian.)

During his discussion with Pierre about the merits of eggplants versus pumpkins, Charlie's eyes drifted past him to the fire on the edge of the beach, where Linus was cooking something on a spit. Harvey and Maru stood nearby, laughing about something; Charlie felt the corners of his own mouth turn up, seeing the doctor so happy. Just as they had at the Flower Dance, their eyes met—but this time, Harvey's expression didn't turn melancholy. On the contrary, he gave Charlie a warm smile and a little wave. Charlie returned it, and Maru turned to grin at him.

“Got your eye on someone, eh?” Pierre asked knowingly, nudging Charlie in the ribs. Charlie jumped a mile; he’d sort of forgotten Pierre was there. “Well, I can’t say I blame you. That Maru is a pretty girl, and smart as a whip.”

Charlie put his hands up in front of him, stammering. “Oh, it’s not—that’s—”

“Don’t worry, I won’t say anything.” Pierre gave him a conspiratorial wink, then leaned in closer. “If I were you, though, I’d get a move on. I think Dr. Harvey’s been sweet on her for ages, and he might actually get up the nerve to ask one of these days.” He chuckled, and Charlie let out a bark of hysterical laughter that probably echoed down the entire beach. Over Pierre’s shoulder, he saw Harvey and Maru looking at him curiously.

“Ha, okay,” Charlie managed, and held up his empty cup. “Look at that, I’m all out of punch! Better go get a refill, see you around, Pierre.” Before the shopkeeper could say another word, Charlie turned and fled toward the drinks. Shane was, naturally, installed beside the punch bowl, watching the proceedings with a glowering expression. He brightened a little as Charlie approached, his shoulders coming down from his ears.

“Having fun?” he asked, as Charlie nearly dove headfirst into the punch.

“Jesus,” Charlie groaned. “If I even look at a woman, the village elders start planning our wedding. How did you deal with this when you were the new guy in town?”

Shane snorted, gesturing to himself with his drink. “Farm boy. Look at me. I make minimum wage, and I’m the first half of a Prozac commercial come to life. *Nobody* was hoping to marry their little girl off to this, believe me.”

“But they don’t even know me!” Charlie protested, fully aware that he still sounded a little hysterical, but powerless to stop himself. “The only things they know are that I have a farm, a tiny house, and a dog. I could be a horrible monster who, I don’t know, gets his jollies sending death threats to celebrities on Twitter.”

“You’d be a gainfully-employed, property-owning monster who’s polite to your elders, so as long as you bring a nice gift at Feast of the Winter Star and keep a roof over their kid’s head, I think you can send as many shitty tweets as you want,” Shane replied. Charlie let out a huff of frustration, staring into his punch.

“I wish this were stronger,” he muttered, and felt a light tap against his arm. He looked up to see Shane holding out a small steel flask, not looking at him.

“Wish granted,” he said, and Charlie gratefully poured a good glug of a brown spirit—whiskey?—into his cup, where it turned the punch an extremely unappetizing color.

“God, you’re the best,” he said fervently, handing the flask back. Shane lifted it, apparently weighing how much was left; then, with a shrug, he poured the rest of the contents into his mouth. He swallowed, wiping the back of his arm over his lips.

“I was a Junimo Scout back in the day,” he said, smirking. “The only lesson I really took home was to always be prepared.” Charlie laughed, and Shane pushed himself off the table,

setting his cup down as he went. “If I get any more sunlight, I might die. I’m heading home.”

“Say hi to the cows for me.”

Shane hesitated, looking back at him. “You want to come? I got that new racing game, *Faster Car 2.* Don’t know if it’s any good, but nobody will harass you about your marital plans.”

The offer was appealing; Charlie was determined not to discuss his love life with anyone else today, and getting drunk in Shane’s room seemed as good a way as any to avoid it. But the party was clearly breaking up, people heading back to town in pairs and little groups, and Charlie noticed that Harvey seemed to be lingering. Maru had left with her parents, and the doctor stood by the edge of the water, staring out at the sunset over the waves.

“I’ll stay put, I think. Should see if Gus and Marnie need any help cleaning up, you know. Next time.” Shane made a dismissive gesture that clearly said *it’s your funeral* and began walking away. “Are we still on for Friday night? Going for the high score on Prairie King?”

“Be there at 8,” Shane called over his shoulder, and Charlie waved to his retreating back. It would be polite, he supposed, to *actually* offer his help; he shuffled dutifully over to where Gus and Marnie were disassembling the soup cauldron.

“Oh, aren’t you sweet,” Marnie gushed when he offered. “You know, I think we’ve got it under control, but thank you so much for asking!”

“Go enjoy the beautiful evening,” Gus added, helping her roll the enormous pot off its scaffold. His duty discharged, Charlie headed down the beach toward Harvey.

Charlie had thought about him (and, on some days, very little else) since their lunch by the fountain. He was pleased at how much Harvey was opening up to him, aside from the dodge about his childhood. Charlie couldn’t blame him, though; in fact, he wondered if he had said too *much* about his dad and the expectations he’d grown up with. But Harvey hadn’t seemed put off by it, had just gone on asking questions in that shy way of his. And then there was the hour they’d spent on less serious topics, talking about books and movies. The book he’d given Charlie really *was* good, and he was looking forward to discussing it with him once he’d finished.

Harvey had taken his jacket off, slinging it over one shoulder, and rolled up his sleeves. Beyond that, he hadn’t changed his wardrobe for the luau at all, and Charlie wondered if he’d spent the whole day sweating half to death. It had been hot enough in Charlie’s outfit of shorts and a tank *(real* shorts this time, not the cutoff jorts), though he was grateful he could finally expose his calves without terrifying the citizenry. All that remained of his slime adventure were a few faint pink circles, and he’d managed not to accrue any new ones on his increasingly frequent trips into the mines. It was difficult to describe how intriguing it was, not knowing what he’d find on the next floor, or the next. What had started out as a necessary chore had turned into a fairly exhilarating hobby. He was starting to understand why Indy Jones and Lara Croft were so into it.

Charlie pulled up beside Harvey, joining him in looking out at the waves. “Lost in thought?” he asked the doctor, and saw him smile out of the corner of his eye.

“As always,” Harvey replied, turning toward him a little. “Did you enjoy the Luau?”

“Um,” Charlie said, and Harvey’s gaze sharpened. “The food was good,” he said feebly. Harvey laughed, covering his mouth.

“That’s about how I feel. The villagers mean well, but it can be a little...overwhelming.”

“They seem very convinced that I’ve come to town solely to find a wife,” Charlie said darkly, and instantly regretted it. Hadn’t he *just* promised himself not to talk about his love life any more today?

“And...you aren’t interested in that?” Harvey seemed to be treading carefully, and Charlie wondered if it meant anything. Was he just trying to avoid being offensive, or did he hope for a certain answer? *Stop overanalyzing everything he says, Charles. You’re going to drive yourself insane.*

“I’m definitely not interested in being set up with anyone,” Charlie finally answered, and Harvey nodded sympathetically.

“People...speculated a lot, in the beginning, about me. I’m not sure if they got bored, or if they just wrote me off as a hopeless case, but nobody’s given me any trouble about it in years. They’ll lose interest eventually,” Harvey assured him with a tight smile. Charlie thought he understood why Harvey looked so pained. As obnoxious as it was to be the center of attention, it was probably just as painful to be totally ignored.

Charlie didn’t think either of them needed to talk about this subject any further today. “Want to take a walk with me?” he suggested to Harvey on impulse, and tilted his head down the beach, in the direction of the docks. Harvey looked surprised, but nodded.

“Okay.”

They strolled along the beach in silence for a while, looking out at the setting sun. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen you down here,” Charlie ventured finally. Harvey grimaced, lifting one of his feet to knee level.

“Honestly, I kind of hate sand,” he confessed. “It’s always getting in my shoes and socks, it drives me crazy.”

Charlie laughed, picking up his own bare foot and wiggling his toes. “You could always take your shoes *off,”* he pointed out. “That’s kind of why people walk on the beach.”

Harvey looked embarrassed, and Charlie felt bad for teasing him. “I know. Truth be told, I have a hard time letting my hair down, so to speak, at these festivals. I’m their doctor, you know?” He shrugged, thrusting his free hand into his pocket. “I suppose I feel I should maintain professionalism. Hard to do in swim trunks and bare feet.”

“But this is your home,” Charlie said gently. “You might work here, but you live here, too. Why shouldn’t you get to take off the stethoscope once in a while?”

Harvey smiled at the ground, but it wasn't a happy expression. “I don’t know that anyone is interested in me without it,” he said ruefully, and Charlie stopped in his tracks. It took Harvey a moment to notice that he’d gotten ahead; when he did, he turned to look back at Charlie.

“That’s not true,” Charlie argued, as firmly as he could manage. “You have friends here, Harvey. Maru cares about you a lot, and...me. I care.”

Harvey gazed impassively at Charlie for a long moment, not speaking; Charlie gazed back as steadily as he could manage. At last, Harvey bent down, reaching for his shoes. He untied them and slipped them off, then removed his socks and tucked them inside. When he’d gotten them settled at a safe distance from the water, he turned back in the direction they’d been headed and resumed walking again. Charlie followed, a bubble of happiness he couldn’t explain expanding in his chest.

“This *is* better,” Harvey admitted, and Charlie let out a soft laugh.

They meandered onto the ancient dock, heading toward the end of the pier by unspoken agreement. Charlie didn’t speak; the air between them felt charged, somehow, and he wondered if Harvey felt it too. Surely it couldn’t just be him. The foot of space between their dangling hands seemed to crackle with electricity, and Charlie wondered what would happen to it if he reached over and closed the gap.

He wanted to, if he was being honest with himself. His reasons for maintaining his distance were seeming flimsier all the time, and he wasn't sure he’d be able to keep it up much longer. But beyond his own reasons, he still wasn't sure how Harvey felt. Their interactions had developed a degree of intimacy he hadn’t yet shared with anyone else in town, not even Shane, who he considered to be his best friend. Things had taken on a flirtatious tone a few times, and he was sure he wasn't imagining it. But he knew Harvey was lonely, and he wondered whether the doctor intended to flirt with him, or if it was just his lack of social interaction making him seem more interested than he really was. It was terrifying to imagine taking that leap, declaring his interest in Harvey at the risk of ruining the friendship they’d built.

They reached the end of the dock, and without any real plan, Charlie sat down. The structure floated high enough that his toes just barely skimmed the water. After a moment, Harvey sat down beside him, and Charlie noted with amusement that Harvey’s feet were submerged up to the ankle. *Am I really that short? Or is he just that tall?*

The sun had set now, and the stars were beginning to twinkle into view. At this hour, the ocean was fairly calm, and its surface reflected the star-studded vastness above; it all appeared to go on forever, stretching as far as Charlie could see. A light breeze stirred his hair, and he tilted his face into it, savoring the coolness.

“It’s so beautiful here,” Charlie said, and Harvey made a sound of agreement beside him. They watched the water for a few minutes, Charlie feeling the old, dull ache he always did when he visited this beach.

“When I come out here,” he began, his voice barely louder than the breeze, “I wonder how my mother could ever have left.”

He could sense Harvey looking at him, but kept his eyes fixed out over the waves; it was easier to talk about this stuff, about things that actually *meant* something, if they weren't looking at each other. "You said she went away to school, and then she met your father?"

"Yeah, and then they moved to the city, and she never came here again," Charlie said. "But I don't think she ever liked the city. It was all for him. It just...doesn't seem worth it."

Harvey drew a breath, then let it out again. Charlie could tell he was choosing his words carefully, and kept silent to give him space. "We all make sacrifices for love," he said at last, sighing. Charlie stole a glance at him; he was staring into the water at his feet, looking miles away. "You just have to hope the benefits outweigh them."

Charlie didn't want to pry, but he was desperately curious; he knew about Philip, of course, but other than the fact that he'd had a shitty boyfriend at one point, Harvey's past was a mystery. "Speaking from experience?" he asked, hoping Harvey wouldn't take offense. The doctor gave a little nod, looking out over the water.

"Sometimes," he said quietly, "it's worth anything just to feel...wanted."

It didn't really answer any of his questions, but the statement squeezed at Charlie's heart just the same. More than ever, he wanted to reach across the dock and take Harvey's hand, but it felt like the wrong time: Harvey needed a friend right now, not a tentative romantic gesture. He settled for shuffling a little bit closer on the edge of the dock. He needed to come up with something useful to say, something wise-sounding and comforting, something that made it clear he was really listening.

"Philip was an idiot," was what came out instead. Charlie cursed himself, but Harvey laughed a little, clearly surprised by the change in tone. He finally met Charlie's eyes.

"He was," he agreed. "I'm sure he still is. Unfortunately, he has an incredible talent for sniffing out loneliness and low self-esteem, and those were kind of my defining traits in my twenties. I…" He swallowed, and even through the dim light Charlie could see his face flushing red. "It sounds pathetic, I know, but back then I preferred not to know if he was cheating on me. As long as he came home every night—well, most nights—I could pretend everything was fine. I'm not making any sense," Harvey added, a little defensively, and Charlie shook his head.

"I think I get it," he assured him.

Harvey hesitated, fiddling with a little piece of worn wood that stuck up from the dock. At last, he said, "You're easy to talk to, Charlie. I...value your friendship." He glanced nervously at Charlie, who did his best to look warm and attentive, trying not to broadcast the pounding in his chest. "I know I've danced around some things, and if it's all right with you, I'd like to just—get them out in the open. Tell you the story, and then we can forget about it and move on to happier topics. Is that all right?"

Charlie nodded, feeling a curious mixture of anticipation and dread. He wanted to know everything, but it was clear Harvey wasn't looking forward to telling him, and he worried what that meant. "Anything you want to tell me, Harvey. I'm listening."

“Well.” Harvey took a deep breath. “My parents died in the First War. My mother was a soldier, my father a humanitarian worker. I was eighteen months old when she was deployed, and he followed her to the front lines. I was left in the care of an uncle, my father’s younger brother. He had never wanted children, and resented being asked to look after me, but my father insisted. He was my only family, you see.

“After the attack that killed my parents, my uncle became my legal guardian. I’m told he actually attempted to give me up for adoption, but the orphanages were so clogged with children from the war, he couldn’t find one that would take me in. He kept me, very begrudgingly, until I turned six and he could send me off to boarding school.”

“At *six?”* Charlie interjected, incredulous. The corner of Harvey’s mustache lifted.

“Oh, yes. It was very expensive, as he reminded me every time we spoke. Which wasn't often; as soon as I was out of his house, he did his best to forget I existed, beyond paying the bills for school.”

“What an asshole,” Charlie growled.

“It’s all right. For a while, it was actually better. I had a few friends, and when I reached my early teens I started spending summers at another boy’s house. But I...misinterpreted his interest in me, and he ended our friendship. He *was* decent enough not to spread rumors around the entire school, though it turned out most of *my* friends were actually just *his* friends.” Harvey smiled, a brittle, hard expression, and continued. “I worked as hard as I could and graduated early, and went to medical school on a full scholarship. When I turned eighteen, a box arrived at my dorm with all of my belongings and a note from my uncle, giving me a few thousand gold and an instruction never to contact him again. And aside from a few trysts here and there in school and residency, that was it for my relationships until I met Philip.” He sighed. “So you see how I ended up with him. He could smell the loneliness on me from a mile away.”

“Harvey…” Charlie had absolutely no idea what to say. It seemed vitally important that he say *something*— the last thing he wanted was for Harvey to think he’d overshared, when Charlie was actually deeply moved that he’d told him everything—but every word he could think of sounded thin and inadequate. He was so angry, so indignant, that this kind and gentle man had been so neglected and mistreated. The fury was making it difficult to put a comforting sentence together. Before he could think of anything, Harvey put him out of his misery.

“Charlie. It’s all right, honestly. I’ve been on my own for decades now. I’m used to it.” He hitched an unconvincing smile onto his face. “One of the best benefits of adulthood is that I can surround myself with people who *do* want me around now. I try not to spend much time thinking about those who didn’t.” Charlie’s face must have looked skeptical, because Harvey tried again. “It’s part of why I choose to live in Pelican Town. I’m needed here; it feels good.”

Charlie felt something loosen in his chest; Harvey was right, at least he’d found his place in the world. He managed a smile, a little sad, but genuine. “I keep thinking you’re such a strong person, and then every time you tell me about yourself I find out you’re even stronger

than I knew," he said. Harvey looked taken aback at this, but he blushed again, which Charlie took as a good sign.

"You're very kind, Charlie."

"I mean it, though. You've been through so much, and you just keep going. I really admire that." He thought for a moment, mulling over the new information Harvey had given him. He could see where the shyness and social anxiety came from, now. No *wonder* he'd been so hesitant to talk to Charlie, so surprised to receive his gifts. Charlie would bring him a jar of pickles every damn day if it would help chase that lingering sadness away. He made a silent vow, that whether Harvey wanted more from him or not, he would always be his friend. Harvey was kind to everyone, and it was about time someone returned the favor. Charlie felt a fierce gratitude for Maru, who he knew had been Harvey's closest friend for years. It helped to know that Harvey hadn't been totally alone in Pelican Town, at least.

"Philip knew all that, about your childhood?" Charlie asked at last, realizing he'd been silent for too long. Harvey tilted his head, confused.

"Yes, I told him everything."

"I was wrong, he wasn't an asshole," Charlie asserted. "He was a *total fucking dick."*

Harvey laughed, a real one, throwing his head back. The sight made something warm glow in Charlie's chest. "Maru prefers 'that shithead,'" he said, still laughing. "I may have thrown around a few instances of 'fucker' when describing him to her after some wine."

"I'd like to throw *him* around," Charlie said darkly, and Harvey grinned at him.

"He isn't worth your time, though I can't pretend I wouldn't love to see that." He leaned back on his hands, apparently at ease again now that the story was out. "What about you? Any exes that need a good beating?"

Ah. Here they were. Charlie wasn't exactly *embarrassed* of his dating history, but he knew it didn't cast him in the best light. "Not really," he said, keeping his tone light. "I haven't really had any super serious relationships. Mostly just dated people for a little while and then moved on. They've always ended pretty amicably, though," he added, in a lame attempt to make himself sound less immature.

"Oh." Harvey seemed to deflate a little at that, and it made Charlie uncomfortable. Was the doctor judging him? Was he reading between the lines to Charlie's unspoken *I pretty much just have fuckbuddies and get a new one when we're bored of each other?* He was torn between the desire to say something that would make him look better, and the conviction that he didn't need to apologize for having slept around. Nobody had gotten their heart broken, after all.

"Just haven't found the right person yet," he settled on— *optimistic but not apologetic, well done, Charlie* —and Harvey smiled at him, though it didn't reach his eyes. *Why is he upset?*

“Maybe you will here,” Harvey said, gesturing back at the town. “There are plenty of single people your age in the village.” He seemed to interrupt himself, rubbing a hand through his hair. “Or maybe you’re not looking. I’m sorry. It’s not any of my business.”

“You’re fine. Don’t worry about it.”

Harvey looked sheepish. “Six years in this village is turning me into Jodi and Caroline,” he said, and Charlie burst out laughing. He mirrored Harvey’s posture, leaning back on his hands.

“Next thing you know you’ll be going to their jazzercise class,” he teased, and to his utter delight, Harvey’s entire face turned a brilliant shade of crimson. Charlie sat up again, his jaw hanging open in a wide grin. “Oh my god! You already do!”

“I do not—”

“Come on, there’s nothing wrong with it,” Charlie insisted, still unable to wipe the grin off his face. “It’s good to get exercise, or so my doctor keeps telling me.”

“Ugh,” Harvey declared, burying his face in his hands. Charlie worried that he’d gone too far, but he saw Harvey’s shoulders shaking, and realized he was laughing too. Harvey turned his head, peeking out at Charlie from behind his hands. “Not all of us get our cardio fighting monsters,” he muttered, and that set Charlie off again.

When their fit of laughter finally subsided, Charlie looked up at the sky. The moon was full and bright, casting its silvery light over the surface of the water and the two of them. Unfortunately, it was also climbing higher and higher into the sky. “It’s getting late,” he said reluctantly, and Harvey made a noncommittal noise from his right.

“You’ve still got a long walk ahead of you,” he said, sitting up and straightening his glasses. “Would you...like some company?”

Was he imagining the hesitation in Harvey’s voice? Charlie found himself losing the ability to be objective. He couldn’t tell anymore if he *actually* felt the tension between them, or if he was just misreading the signs, hearing what he wanted to hear. Either way, he knew the right answer, even if it wasn't the one he would have liked to give.

“Nice of you to offer, but your place is so close. No sense making you walk all that way and back.” He smiled at Harvey, and the doctor nodded, looking as though he’d expected that response. “But you’re on my way. I’ll walk *you* home.” Judging by the way his face lit up, it didn’t look like Harvey had expected *that,* and as they stood and set off for the square, Charlie thought he might have noticed a little extra skip in his step.

Chapter 8: Summer, Year 1

Chapter Summary

> Harvey can't sleep. Charlie pays Robin a visit. The Dance of the Moonlight Jellies arrives, but to Harvey's concern, Charlie doesn't.

Chapter Notes

> Heads up: we're dipping a toe into that E rating this chapter! Don't read this one at work, maybe.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harvey couldn’t sleep.

It wasn’t an uncommon problem for him—anxiety had always kept him up nights, even under the best circumstances, but it hadn’t happened for a few months now. These sleepless nights were, shamefully, one of the times he still missed Philip. Not because of the man himself, just because he missed a warm body in the bed beside him, steady breaths lulling him to sleep.

That’s not the warm body you’re thinking of, his brain helpfully supplied, and he rolled over to groan into the pillow. It was true: when he tried to conjure the feeling of someone in the bed, it wasn’t Philip’s long, pale, slender back he imagined spooning up against. It was a much shorter, tanner, and more muscular form he pictured.

“Stop,” he said out loud, muffled into the pillow, but it was useless: his mind was off to the races now. What would Charlie look like as he slept? Would he sprawl out, arms flung above his head and auburn hair spilling carelessly over the pillow? Would he curl onto his side, smiling eyes on Harvey as they drifted shut? Would he...maybe...pull Harvey into his arms, let him rest his head on his chest, hold him close through the night?

There were times, just little moments, where Harvey thought maybe it wasn’t entirely without hope. Charlie liked him, he knew that much; even knowing he was friendly to everyone, there was no denying he went out of his way to spend time with Harvey. He visited the clinic all the time, dropping off gifts and lingering around to talk.

Maybe it’s all for Maru.

Maybe. But that didn’t explain the time they spent alone: sharing an occasional drink in the saloon, sitting by the fountain and chatting about books. To say nothing of their walk down to

the docks after the Luau, when Harvey had laid his entire sordid past bare, and Charlie had responded with... *admiration.* He asked Harvey questions about himself, wanted to learn about his life, sympathized with him and laughed with him. He made Harvey feel, for the first time in years, interesting.

He's just friendly, and you know it.

That was true, of course. Charlie *was* friendly. He and Marnie joked like the oldest of friends, he frequently walked with Penny while she escorted the children home from school, and he had even been spotted sitting across the fire from Linus outside his tent. He'd brought grouchy George wild leeks in the spring and seemed to give away half of his produce to the villagers, always remembering what everyone liked best. And of course, he spent lots of time with Shane—at least as much time as he did with Harvey, truth be told. The thought twisted something in Harvey's stomach, but he tried to fight it back. Why did that automatically mean something was going on with Shane? Why couldn't it just as easily be Harvey?

Who are you kidding? Look at yourself.

Harvey rolled onto his back and closed his eyes, the familiar weight of self-loathing settling onto him like a blanket. That was what it came down to, really: the reason why none of Charlie's smiles or jokes or gifts could ever possibly mean anything more. Because they were directed at *Harvey,* who knew that he was dull, unfashionable, aging, sad. With so many outgoing, good-looking young people in town, who would take a second look at him? The fact that Charlie paid him any attention at all was miraculous, and it was probably at least half out of pity. Charlie was kind; he wouldn't want to see someone so obviously lonely. It didn't mean he wanted Harvey at all.

But, oh, imagine if he did, whispered a different voice inside. He called up the mental image of the two of them together, intending to prove to himself how ridiculous it would look, how unthinkable. Instead, his breath caught. He pictured them at the Dance of the Moonlight Jellies, his arm comfortably around Charlie's shorter shoulders, Charlie's arm slung around his waist. Harvey would look away from the luminous jellyfish to find Charlie watching him, those beautiful eyes warm on his face. And then that smile would unfold—not the big, beaming one he gave everyone, but that small private one, the one that Harvey sometimes managed to believe was just for him.

Harvey was mortified to realize that he was hard. It seemed he'd reached new depths of loneliness—just imagining Charlie *looking* at him had gotten him this way. He did his best to ignore it, but it had been so long since he'd even touched himself; his body was insistent, and he knew it would be useless to go on attempting sleep. Briefly, he considered getting up and taking a cold shower, but then he remembered seeing Charlie half-shirtless the other day, and he gave up resisting. As his hand closed around his aching flesh, he bit back a cry. Yoba, it really *had* been a while.

Now that he'd given in to the demands of his body, his mind ran riot. Unbidden, he pictured Charlie kneeling beside him on the bed, his dark eyes hungry as they roamed over Harvey's skin. He was fully dressed, but his shirt was partially open, low enough that Harvey could see a faint sheen of sweat over his suprasternal notch. Harvey licked his lips, sliding his hand tentatively along his length.

"You're beautiful," said the Charlie of his dreams.

Harvey gasped, his movements speeding up. He didn't think he had ever wanted anyone so badly; he couldn't remember the last time he'd been this hard. Just the idea of Charlie watching him, pinning him with that warm gaze, was doing more for him than any pornography possibly could. He tightened his fingers, hips coming off the bed to meet his fist, and let out a keening whine he tried to stifle.

"It's all right," dream-Charlie whispered. *"Let me hear you."*

Harvey groaned aloud, fiercely glad no one else lived in the building. He wasn't going to last long; already he could feel the tension building, his balls drawing up tight against his body. Behind his squeezed-shut eyelids, Charlie leaned over him, bracing himself up with one hand.

"That's it," he murmured, *"come for me, Harvey, come on, I want to see you—"*

"Charlie," Harvey cried out, body arching off the mattress, and came so hard he nearly blacked out. When he returned to Earth, he lay panting for a moment, covered in his own release, hand still curled around his subsiding erection. Yoba, he'd needed that; he felt blissfully heavy, loose-limbed and flooded with endorphins. He rolled his head to the side, half-expecting to see Charlie still kneeling there.

But dream-Charlie was nowhere to be found. Slowly, the old self-loathing trickled back in, thicker and more choking than ever. He fumbled around on the floor and found a discarded T-shirt to clean up with, disgusted with himself. Charlie had been genuinely kind to him, had offered him respect and friendship, and *this* was how Harvey thanked him? By picturing him saying all kinds of lewd, ridiculous things—by using him as some kind of masturbatory aid? He didn't deserve Charlie. He didn't even deserve his *friendship.* It was no wonder he was alone.

Harvey lay flat on his back, staring up at nothing, the afterglow of orgasm already long gone. In its place, he felt only a bleak despair. He felt like a far-flung planet, warmed by the sun around which he orbited, but unable to ever reach it. He felt like a pervert. He felt utterly, completely alone in the dark.

* * * * *

Charlie shut the shipping box quickly, sure he'd been hallucinating. He wasn't entirely awake yet; it was totally possible he was seeing double through the sleep in his eyes, the dim dawn light. He scrubbed a forearm across his eyes, took a deep breath, and opened the box again. The pounding of his heart started up again, because he hadn't been hallucinating at all, it was still in there: the largest pile of money he'd ever seen in one place. Perched on top, in its usual innocuous brown envelope, was the receipt from Lewis for everything he'd picked up before sunrise. He tore it open with shaking fingers, still fairly certain there had been a mistake. As his eyes scanned over the invoice, he let out a gust of breath, comprehension dawning.

“Fuckin’ *blueberries,”* he breathed, completely thunderstruck. Pierre had told him they were the most lucrative thing he could grow in the summer, and he’d obediently planted rows upon rows of bushes. At harvesting time, when he’d had to spend hours in the sun digging through clusters of leaves and pulling them gently off, he’d wondered if Pierre had just been fucking with him. But now the evidence was in his hands, and for the first time since he’d arrived in Pelican Town, he wasn't broke.

It all snapped into place, the realization that *I can make a living at this* hitting him like a train. If he could manage to make this much money on just a few rows of blueberries, what could he do next year when he could expand? Maybe he could hire some farmhands, spread the work around and be a little less miserable at the changing of the seasons. He could actually *do* this. He wasn't going to die destitute in his tiny shack.

“Speaking of the tiny shack,” he said to Bones, who had come ambling sleepily out of the house, “I think it’s time to pay a visit to Robin.”

Robin was, predictably, delighted that Charlie had finally come to see her. “I have *so many ideas!”* she exclaimed, clapping her hands together. “I checked the structural integrity before you moved in, and it’s surprisingly solid. We can build a whole second floor—plenty of room for a library, a bedroom or two for kids—”

“Whoa, whoa, hold it,” Charlie stammered, holding up his hands. “First of all, nobody is having kids. I don’t even have someone to have kids *with,”* he pointed out. Robin shrugged, rolling her eyes. “Second, I don’t need a second floor. I just need a *kitchen.* Maybe a bedroom with a door, and a few less holes in the porch. That’s all.”

Robin sighed, as though he were being willfully aggravating. “You say that *now,* but you’re going to want more space eventually,” she insisted. “Why not just do it all at once?”

“Because I got a paycheck, not one of those giant cardboard checks for winning the lottery. Seriously, Robin, it’s all I can afford.”

He saw her physically rein in another sigh, but she scribbled some notes down on a work order. “Fine,” she agreed at last. “I’ll get started tomorrow. You have wood and stone from clearing the land, right? I can use that, save you some money,” she offered.

“That’d be great. I have piles of it just sitting around.” She pushed the paper toward him for a signature, and he picked up the pen, then hesitated. “Um. Could you possibly build me a bigger bed, too?”

Robin got a twinkle in her eye that couldn’t possibly bode well, and Charlie instantly regretted asking. “Hard to work on those kids with only a single, I agree,” she teased, and Charlie groaned.

“Come on, Robin. I’m just tired of sleeping in a bed smaller than the one I had in my dorm. Can you do it or not?”

“All right, all right. I’m sorry. Just having some fun with you.” She wrote it down on the work order, but didn’t change the total. “I’ve got a new lathe I’ve been dying to try, so I’ll throw it in for free. On the house, if you’ll forgive the pun.”

“I won’t. That was pretty bad.”

She made a face of exaggerated annoyance, then pushed the paper at him again. “Sign this, and I’ll let you get out of here.”

“Gladly.” He scribbled a signature down and said his goodbyes, feeling a little bubble of happiness at the prospect of having an actual *kitchen* soon. And a bigger bed. A bed that would be much more comfortable for him to sprawl out in, *not* for the purposes of procreation. He definitely wasn't buying it because he was thinking about getting laid, especially not by a handsome doctor who seemed to become more irresistible every time Charlie saw him. He was just buying it as a nice thing to do for himself; he worked hard, and deserved to be comfortable. Self-care! Wasn't that the big thing these days?

And if it just so happened that his new house was a little less embarrassing to bring potential dates back to, well, that was just a nice bonus.

* * * * *

Festivals, as a general rule, weren’t Harvey’s thing. It was overwhelming and exhausting to be surrounded by the entire village, noise coming from every direction, making small talk all day. He had a tendency to hover around the fringes, especially if the festival wasn't in the town square—when it was happening right outside his front door, he felt less guilty about going home, but if it was happening in the forest he felt the need to be available for medical emergencies. If it hadn’t been for Maru and her parents’ company the last few years, he probably would have outright dreaded them.

He had made more of a habit of socializing lately, though. Or at least, he hoped it looked that way to others, because “socializing” was a less embarrassing reason to be frequenting the saloon than “desperately hoping Charlie would show up.” Emily had commented on his increase in business, but hadn’t seemed to read anything into it; she was just pleased he was getting out more. Honestly, his already-empty wallet didn’t need the extra strain of a three-nights-a-week wine habit, but he was making it work.

At any rate, there were exceptions to every rule, and the Dance of the Moonlight Jellies was Harvey’s. It was the one festival he actively looked forward to each year, and he never missed it. Part of it was the jellies themselves, utterly lovely and mysterious beneath the waves; part of it was the reverent hush that fell over the crowd once the first spot of bioluminescence appeared on the horizon. He never felt more a part of the community than when he stood amongst the silent crowd, his neighbors just as transfixed as he was.

This year, as he headed across the beach to the docks, he felt a little flutter of anticipation in his stomach. While he still regarded his fantasy about Charlie with some shame, he couldn’t quite shake the original picture in his mind: the two of them side-by-side at this very festival. For the briefest moment of madness, he had actually considered asking Charlie to come with him, but when push came to shove he was nowhere near brave enough for *that.* Anyway, it

was too easy to be misconstrued; Charlie might have said yes, but almost certainly *just as friends,* and Harvey didn't know how to get past that point. If Harvey actually asked him to be his date, and Charlie said no, he'd ruin not only a close friendship but his favorite night of the year. It wasn't worth the risk.

He *could* find Charlie on the docks, though. There was no real reason why two friends couldn't stand together to watch the spectacle. And Charlie would probably appreciate being invited to watch with Harvey's usual group, since he was new in town. Harvey was so focused on finding him, he actually looked right over Maru's head and walked into her; at her bark of indignation, he backed away, stammering apologies.

"Is your eyesight getting worse?" she asked, half-mocking, half-concerned. "What's with you? I was calling your name."

"Sorry, sorry," Harvey said hastily, straightening his glasses. "I was distracted, I guess."

"Nothing new there," Maru said airily, and they continued onto the dock together. Robin and Demetrius stood close to the shore, both sipping drinks they'd brought. Sebastian was, as usual, ignoring his family in favor of Sam and Abigail. Harvey greeted Maru's parents, coming to a stop at his usual spot beside them.

"Lovely night," he said to Robin, though his attention was only half on her; fortunately, in the dark, it was fairly easy to conceal the fact that he was looking over her head. He scanned the dock for a head of auburn curls, but didn't see any sign of Charlie yet. He *was* coming, wasn't he? Maybe Harvey actually should have invited him; it would be a shame if he missed it. Robin mentioned Charlie's name, and Harvey's attention snapped back to her as quickly as if she'd shouted at him.

"—been busy working on his house, just about finished with it now. You won't even recognize it! His grandpa would be proud, seeing his old place all fixed up."

"Charlie's been renovating?" He fought to catch up, which was easier said than done when he'd tuned out the first half of her explanation. Robin didn't seem to notice his distraction, fortunately. "What did he have done?"

"Oh, quite a bit. Put in a kitchen for him, a bedroom, a bigger porch, bigger bed."

"That sounds...nice." Harvey's brain had tripped and fallen over *bigger bed,* which he knew was ridiculous. Who *wouldn't* get sick of sleeping in a single? Harvey got tired of his own bed, which was bigger than a single but not by much—having too much empty real estate around him while he slept tended to depress him. Still, he'd arrived at the low point of his infatuation, where even an innocent detail like *decided to upgrade to a queen* was fuel for his overwrought imagination.

With all the mental discipline he could muster, Harvey focused back on what Robin was saying, nodding politely and asking benign questions about the construction process. She and Demetrius were kind enough to let Harvey spend holidays with them; the least he could do was actually listen to her. Nearby, Maru and Demetrius discussed an experiment they'd been running together, the details of which were way above Harvey's pay grade. Demetrius treated

Harvey as a fellow “man of science,” which was kind of him, but in all honesty he knew very little about anything outside of human anatomy. Unless it was related to wind speed and lift, of course.

At a pause in the conversation, Harvey stole a glance at his watch. It was nearing time for the jellies to arrive, and he still hadn’t seen so much as a glimpse of Charlie. He squinted and peered across the dock, and finally saw Shane, standing hand-in-hand with Jas. Surely if Charlie was here, he’d be with them? Making his excuses as gently as he could, Harvey set off toward the pair on the dock. He pretended he didn’t notice Maru’s surprised gaze following him.

She wasn't the only one surprised; Shane looked downright shocked that someone had chosen to come and talk to him, let alone Harvey, who rarely initiated a conversation with anyone. Harvey smiled down at Jas, and she ducked behind Shane’s leg, smiling back shyly.

“Hi, Shane.”

“Doc. I know I need to make an appointment, I just haven’t—”

“I’m not here to harass you about your medical history,” Harvey assured him, holding up his hands with a little laugh. “I’m taking the night off. I just wondered, have you seen Charlie anywhere? I thought he’d be with you.”

Shane shrugged. “Nope, haven’t seen him yet. He told me yesterday he was coming, but who knows.” His brow furrowed, and Harvey could see the gears turning in his head. “It *is* weird he hasn’t showed up. He said he was excited to see it.”

“Weird,” Harvey agreed. “Thanks. Sorry to bother you.”

Harvey wondered, sometimes, what it was like to be a person without anxiety. To be someone who could shrug something off as “weird” without falling down the rabbit hole of possible explanations: injured in the mine again. Sick at home. Rethinking his entire life in the village and deciding to move back to Zuzu City. Probably none of those were as likely as “just forgot” or “decided he wasn't that interested,” but they were *possible,* weren’t they? Harvey had imagined watching the jellies side-by-side with Charlie and he’d imagined watching them as the two stood with their separate groups of friends, but he had never imagined Charlie not showing up at all.

He cast a glance at Lewis, who was chatting with Willy near the little boat they used to send out the candle. Probably the mayor would be lighting it any minute; Charlie was almost certainly going to miss it. After a brief but fierce internal debate, Harvey made a decision.

“Pierre,” he said, approaching the shopkeeper where he stood with Caroline. “Can I borrow your car for a minute?”

Pierre’s SUV wasn't exactly a luxury vehicle, but it was a lot faster than what Harvey had, which was nothing. He hadn’t seen the need for a car when he’d moved to such a small town,

and had sold his when he'd left Zuzu City. As he bumped down the road to Charlie's farm, he kept hoping to see the missing farmer along the way; if this took very long, Harvey was going to miss the jellies too, and they wouldn't return for another year. Maru had been aghast that he was leaving so close to the start time. "Are you crazy? You're going to miss it!"

"Charlie should be here. You can't sit out your first year." He decided not to share with her his vague worry that something had happened, aware he sounded pathetic enough already.

But Charlie was nowhere along the road, and when Harvey arrived at the farm, he saw that the lights were on in the farmhouse. It *was* bigger, no longer just a single room, and the porch seemed to be significantly less riddled with holes. Bones lay on the doormat with his head on his paws, but as Harvey cut the engine and swung open his door, the dog leapt to his feet and barked joyously.

"Hello, boy," Harvey laughed, half-petting the dog and half-shielding himself from his jumping. "Where's your human?"

"Shit!" cried a muffled voice from inside, and it seemed Harvey had his answer. He came around the car toward the door, but as he put his foot on the bottom step of the porch, the front door banged open hard enough to rattle the windows. Charlie came stumbling through it, tugging on a boot with both hands as he awkwardly hopped on the other foot. He gave a sideways lurch, cursing, and Harvey hurried forward to steady him.

"Whoa, whoa!" Harvey said, and Charlie's head jerked up in surprise; apparently he hadn't noticed the doctor or the SUV in his haste.

"Harvey! I just sat down for a minute to drink some coffee, but I fell asleep—did I miss the, the jelly thing—"

"Not yet," Harvey assured him. "You're about to, though. Can I give you a ride?"

"Yet another favor I owe you," Charlie sighed, but he climbed into the front seat. Bones complained strenuously about being left behind, but Harvey doubted Pierre would be thrilled about muddy paws and shed fur in his car.

"It's really exhausting, the end of the season," Charlie explained as they sped down the road. "I'm trying to get everything picked before the temperatures drop too low. The blueberries are already wilting...I'm going to miss those," he added wistfully.

"I hear cranberries are lucrative in the fall," Harvey suggested, casually, as though he hadn't looked up this information in the hopes of giving Charlie a helpful tip. Apparently he'd sold it well enough, because Charlie's face lit up in his peripheral vision.

"That's what Pierre said, too! Thanks for the confirmation. If they're anything like the blueberries, I should probably just plant a whole field of them. Although if I don't plant at least a couple pumpkins, Abigail will come after me, and she's got a sword."

"Best to avoid that," Harvey agreed conspiratorially.

“What about you?” Charlie asked, turning to face him. “Any favorite fall veggies I can grow for you?”

“Oh, no, please. Don’t worry about me.”

“I’m not *worrying,* I’m asking. What do you like?”

Harvey smiled, shrugging. “There’s a dish I like that can only be made in the fall, but it’s got a lot of ingredients...bok choy, cranberries, artichokes. Not worth the trouble of growing all that. Maybe I’ll make it for you sometime.”

“Your culinary talents extend beyond sandwiches!” Charlie exclaimed, and Harvey stole a glance at him, unsure if he was being made fun of; Charlie’s smile was warm and his eyes gentle, though, so Harvey let himself relax.

“Occasionally,” he conceded. “When I have someone to cook for.”

They had arrived back at the store, and Harvey threw the car into park before Charlie could respond to this last remark. He set out across the square at a fast clip, and Charlie fell into step beside him, squinting toward the beach.

“We’re cutting it pretty close, huh?”

“We are. Hopefully we haven’t...oh.” As they crossed the bridge to the beach, Harvey’s heart sank. Families and clusters of villagers were making their way toward them, away from the dock, and the jellies were nothing more than a faint blue glow on the western horizon.

They’d missed it.

“Where’d you go, Doc?” Gus asked as he sidled past them, following Emily and Haley back to town. “Surprised you’d miss—”

“I had something important to attend to,” Harvey said loudly, cutting Gus off mid-sentence. The last thing he wanted was for Charlie to feel guilty. Maru filed past and kept mercifully silent, though she raised an eyebrow at Harvey that said *we’re going to discuss this later.* At last, Charlie gestured toward the beach.

“Come on, let’s go down there anyway,” he suggested. “Maybe we can still see them a little bit.”

Fighting against the crowd, it took a few minutes to reach the dock, and there was no hint of blue anywhere in the water by the time they’d taken their positions on the edge. Harvey tried not to be too disappointed—he was a grown man, after all, he shouldn’t be so emotionally invested in the migration of some fish—but he felt the loss all the same. Not only had he missed the jellies, he’d missed watching them with *Charlie.* He hadn’t realized how much he’d gotten his hopes up until they were dashed.

After a few minutes of standing in silence, the beach was deserted. Willy had gone inside and locked up, Elliot and Leah had disappeared into the writer’s cabin, and everyone else had returned to their homes. Charlie took a breath.

“This was important to you, wasn't it,” he said, not a question. Harvey glanced at him from the corner of his eye; Charlie wasn't looking at him, gaze fixed out on the water.

“Oh, it’s no big—”

“Harvey.”

Harvey sighed, his shoulders slumping. “A bit,” he admitted at last. Charlie frowned down at the water.

“And you missed it because of me.”

“No,” Harvey insisted, trying to keep his voice gentle but firm. It was important that Charlie understand this. “I missed it because of *me.* You didn’t ask me to come get you.”

“Why did you?” Charlie still wouldn’t look at him, and Harvey didn’t know how to interpret it. Was he...angry, for some reason? Did he feel awkward about Harvey having come to find him? Had Harvey overstepped? He wished for the thousandth time that he was better at these things, that he knew how to read others’ feelings and understand them.

“I wanted you to see it,” he ventured at last, and Charlie turned toward him. His gaze began at his shorter eye level, around Harvey’s collarbone, and then traveled upward with infinitesimal slowness. Over Harvey’s neck, his jaw, his mouth, and finally up to meet his eyes; Harvey hoped it was darker than he thought, because otherwise everything he felt was right there on his face, he was powerless to hide it. He couldn’t even *breathe.* Yoba, he wanted to kiss him. He wanted it more than he’d ever wanted anything; he felt himself sway involuntarily, his body trying to get closer. Could he? What would happen if he did? Charlie was just standing there, staring at him with that unreadable expression, inches away. Surely this wasn't something platonic friends did. Surely Harvey couldn’t be misreading the signals *that* much.

Could he?

He’d very nearly made up his mind—for once, he was going to go after what he wanted, he had to *know*— when a faint green glow lit the planes of Charlie’s face. It must have lit his own, too, because Charlie’s expression shifted to one of confusion. “What—?” Charlie turned toward the water again, and Harvey felt he’d missed something profound and beautiful for the second time that night. It was unbearable. He hated himself for being such a coward.

But then: “Harvey, look!” Harvey followed Charlie’s pointing finger, still lost in self-loathing, and suddenly forgot everything else. There, floating just below the surface of the water three feet away, was an enormous jellyfish—and this one was *green.* “I thought you said they were blue?” Charlie was asking excitedly, and Harvey felt his spirits lift, happiness rising up in him like a balloon.

“They are,” Harvey said, “except for one, supposedly. I thought it was a myth; I’ve never seen it before.” He could see Charlie’s delighted grin, lit up by the fish’s bioluminescence, and the thought burned brightly inside him: *it was worth it.* “It’s so far behind the others,” he added, following the fish with his eyes as it began to drift away. “I hope it’ll be all right.”

A soft, warm pressure on his upper arm startled him; he looked down to see that Charlie had bumped his shoulder against his arm, letting it linger there for a moment before drawing away again.

“Better late than never,” he murmured. Harvey wondered if they were still talking about the jellyfish. He followed the ghostly fish with his eyes until its green glow disappeared over the horizon, drifting on toward parts unknown, a glimmer of light in the endless dark.

Chapter End Notes

Thanks again for sticking with the story! We're about to get to the Good Stuff, and I hope you like it. I'll keep posting daily updates over the weekend, and replying to your (lovely) comments!

Chapter 9: Fall, Year 1

Chapter Summary

> Charlie has a revelation, and a question to ask. Maru and Marnie have a front-row seat. Harvey frets...until he doesn't.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Autumn in the Valley brought a flurry of activity with it, seemingly affecting everyone. Charlie was busy for days planting his largest fields yet, though with the help of Maru's sprinklers, he stopped losing half his days to watering. His chickens were full-grown now and had just begun producing eggs, to his delight. Marnie could be seen out in the fields most days, swinging a heavy sickle and putting away fodder for the winter. The gardens in the town square looked better than ever, Evelyn doubling her efforts as the Stardew Valley Fair approached. Even the village children were kept busy making Spirit's Eve decorations, carving jack-o-lanterns with Penny and Abigail.

As with every other year, Harvey was trapped in his exam room by an endless line of runny noses, feverish foreheads, and sore throats. Mercifully, he and Maru had developed nearly bulletproof immune systems over the years, and both stayed healthy. They dispensed antihistamines and flu shots from early in the morning until after dark, sometimes staying open well past the posted closing time to accommodate everyone. The worst part of this, to Harvey, was that it removed almost every opportunity he would have had to spend time with Charlie. Lunches by the fountain were right out, and by the time the last patient shuffled out of the clinic each evening, he was far too exhausted to drag himself to the saloon.

Nearly a week into the new season, Charlie stopped by the clinic. He'd hoped to see Harvey, but the doctor was busy trying to administer a flu shot to a squirming Vincent, and couldn't leave the exam room. Maru, eyes heavy with dark circles, explained how busy they'd been, how little Harvey was eating and sleeping. And so, from that day on, Charlie made a point to stop by the clinic at lunchtime every day, dropping off food for Maru and Harvey. He'd started to become really good at cooking now that he had a functional kitchen, and with the weather turning chilly, he had been making a pot of soup every day. It was simple enough to adjust his schedule so that he took his break in the early afternoon, toting along two jars of homemade soup and a hunk of bread (which he had baked himself and was, secretly, more proud of than anything else—"this is some Martha Stewart shit," Shane had proclaimed, which Charlie interpreted as a compliment). Maru was grateful for the meals, and Harvey—when Charlie was able to see him—practically fell over himself in thanks. They never had time to eat together, but it warmed Charlie's heart all the same, seeing Harvey's tired face light up.

He thought he'd do almost anything to see that expression on Harvey's face. In fact, he thought of little else, as he plowed his fields and planted row after row of cranberries (and pumpkins, and bok choy, and artichokes). Biking to town for seeds, feeding the chickens, collecting eggs, felling trees; no matter what he was doing, the doctor was on his mind. He replayed little bits of their recent interactions: the warmth of his shoulder against Charlie's as they watched the green jellyfish, his helpless laughter on the dock, the way he'd come to life at the fountain while describing a book he loved. Those little things had combined with the larger, deeper moments they'd shared, forming a potent cocktail of infatuation Charlie didn't seem to be able to shake off.

The realization hit him one day, leaving the clinic after delivering a late lunch into Harvey's grateful hands. The doctor had thanked him for his cooking, informed him that the mad rush of patients seemed to be calming down, and shyly asked if he'd see him at the saloon that evening. Walking out the door, Charlie felt a sensation like the moment you realized you were awake, a gradual transition that went unnoticed until it had already been made: he didn't *want* to shake it off. None of his excuses, his sensible declarations about focusing on his work and avoiding attachments, rang true anymore. He still didn't know how Harvey felt, but he knew one thing, as fiercely as he'd known he had to leave his old life behind: he wanted Harvey. *Really* wanted him; not just to find out how he tasted and what sounds he made in bed, but to know what he looked like when he woke up in the morning, how he smelled when he came out of the shower, whether he hummed to himself when he cooked. He wanted to build something with Harvey that he'd never had with anyone else in his life, and that felt like heading down into the mines, equal parts terrifying and thrilling.

Caught up in his newfound revelation, Charlie had stood staring at one of Evelyn's autumnal arrangements in the square for God-knew-how-long, until he was startled by a hand on his shoulder. "Jesus!"

"You on another planet there, farm boy?" Shane came around to stand beside him, scowling, and Charlie shook himself.

"Sorry. I don't know what's gotten into me," he said. Shane squinted at him for a long moment; Charlie didn't know what he was looking for, but he must have found it, because he let out a long-suffering sigh and rubbed a hand over his face.

"Ugh, I do." He returned his hand to Charlie's shoulder, giving him a shove toward the Stardrop. "Come on. I need a drink if I'm going to listen to this."

Charlie stammered his protest, looking over his shoulder as they made their way toward the door. "It's still early, and, um, I don't actually know what you're talking ab—"

"Save it. Beer. Now."

"...Okay."

* * * * *

"All right," Shane said once he'd taken a long swallow of his beer, "spit it out."

Charlie feigned ignorance, feeling he should at least *try* not to make the entire evening about him. “Spit what out?”

Shane gave an impatient sigh. “Are you going to tell me why you’re running around grinning like an idiot, or are we going to talk about the fucking weather all night?” Charlie ducked his head, more or less grinning like an idiot. Leave it to Shane.

“That obvious, huh,” he said ruefully, toying with his beer mat. Shane didn’t bother responding, just raised an eyebrow and waited. “Well, it’s...the thing is, I...um—”

“Yoba almighty,” Shane hissed, “if you don’t get it out in the next five seconds—”

“I think I'm in love,” Charlie blurted, and though he felt himself blushing bright red, he couldn’t keep the smile from his face. Shane’s other eyebrow joined the first in an expression of surprise, then both settled into his normal surly expression.

“I’m flattered, farm boy, but you’re not really my type,” he smirked. Charlie’s mouth dropped open before he realized Shane was joking, and he threw his balled-up napkin into his smug face.

“Oh, shut up,” Charlie snapped, as Shane chuckled behind his beer glass. “You *wish.”*

“I *wish* you’d quit pretending you don’t want to tell me. We both know you do, so just pour your dumb heart out and get it over with.”

“You know, it’s embarrassing when you get so mushy in public, Shane. Keep it together or people will talk.”

“Last chance,” Shane drawled, holding up his nearly-empty glass. “If you’re still dancing around when I finish this, I’m leaving.”

Charlie took a deep breath; he desperately wanted to tell someone, but it was surprisingly difficult to get out. “It’s Harvey,” he said at last, dropping his gaze. Though he didn’t hide it, exactly, he hadn’t come out to anyone in Pelican Town yet, and there was always the little hint of unease about the reaction he would get. He couldn’t imagine Shane having a real problem with his sexuality, but sometimes even the polite surprise could be exhausting. Then there was the subject of his affections: he knew Harvey was shy and had a bit of a reputation around town for being a nerd, which he actually found extremely cute, but he thought it all might come as a surprise to some people. When he didn’t get a response for several seconds, he glanced up to see Shane eyeing him closely.

“You’re serious?” Shane asked, taking another sip of his beer. Charlie scrutinized his face; he didn’t look shocked, or incredulous, or anything else. Just curious.

“I am,” Charlie said, with a small, quick smile. “Totally serious. I’ve never felt this way before, Shane, it’s just...when I’m around him, I…”

“I take it back,” Shane interrupted, scowling theatrically. “I miss when you weren’t talking.” Charlie kicked him under the table, rolling his eyes.

“He makes me happy,” he said simply.

“Glad to hear it. So, might I ask…” Shane leaned forward, setting his empty glass aside and folding his arms on the table. “Why are you talking to *me* about this, and not *him?”*

Charlie blushed, looking down at the table again. “It’s not that easy,” he replied. “What if he doesn’t…Maybe this is all one-sided. I don’t know if he feels that way about me at all, or—*what* is your problem?” Shane had begun laughing halfway through his speech, and Charlie glared at him, outraged.

“Farm boy,” Shane began, still laughing behind his hand, “I knew you weren’t the brightest, but I thought you had *eyes.”* At Charlie’s confused expression, he continued, “Have you seriously not noticed him mooning around, staring at you, just *happening* to show up in the same places you are?”

“It’s a small town,” Charlie protested, scowling. “Of course he’s going to be at the saloon when I’m here, sometimes.”

“That man set foot in here once in a blue moon before you came to town,” Shane insisted. “Saw him in here *maybe* once every two weeks, now he’s in here every other day. What do you think changed? You think he suddenly decided he needed a drink ten times as often?”

“Maybe, since he’s got you for a patient,” Charlie retorted, and now it was his turn to receive a kick in the shins.

Shane reached across the table and swiped Charlie’s half-empty beer, ignoring his bark of protest. After a long drink, he sat back, face suddenly serious.

“Charlie,” he began, “joking aside, anyone can see that man’s head over heels for you. Everybody’s used to seeing him alone; we’d have to be blind not to notice it.” Charlie tried to speak, and Shane held up a hand to stop him. “It’s a good thing. The doc’s one of the better guys in town, and this is coming from a known shithead. He’s been lonely for a long time, from what I hear. If you’re gonna fix that, I’m happy for you both.”

Out of nowhere, Charlie felt a lump in his throat. He searched for a joke to lighten the mood, but came up empty. At last, he pushed his foot against Shane’s shin, more of a nudge than a kick this time. “Thanks, man.”

As if on cue, the door opened, and a wind-blown Harvey stepped inside. He returned Gus’s friendly greeting with a wave, but his eyes scanned the booths and tables, looking for something. When his gaze met Charlie’s, his face visibly brightened; he took a half-step forward before apparently noticing Shane, and then faltered. Charlie decided to put him out of his misery.

“No time like the present, I guess,” he said, his heart speeding up as he stood. Shane cocked his head, confusion written on his face.

“You got flowers hiding in that backpack?”

“Flowers? No,” Charlie said, mirroring Shane’s confused look with his own. “I was just going to, you know, ask him out? I do have some pickles, he loves those,” he added lamely.

Shane shook his head and gave another bone-deep sigh, as though Charlie were more stupid than he could bear. “Look, farm boy, in this town you gotta give someone flowers when you ask them out,” he explained, in a tone usually reserved for children. “It’s tradition.”

“But—he’s right there,” Charlie protested, gesturing to the doctor who was now frozen awkwardly in the middle of the room, looking increasingly flustered.

“Don't know what to tell you. Unless you're just going for a one-night stand kinda thing, you need the flowers.”

“I don’t even think he *likes* flowers that much. Can’t I just—”

“Yeah, of course, you’re right,” Shane said airily, waving a dismissive hand. “Harvey seems like a confident guy, I’m sure he’ll understand without you having to spell it out for him. By, you know, doing things in literally the *only* way everyone else does.” He took a sip of his beer. Charlie looked over his shoulder at Harvey, who blushed bright pink and gave him a smile that made Charlie weak in the knees. He looked helplessly back at Shane, who had one eyebrow raised again.

“Pierre’s opens at 9,” Shane said simply, and with an aggravated sigh, Charlie stalked off to engage Harvey in completely platonic conversation.

* * * * *

Charlie left the saloon earlier than usual, saying he had a lot to do in the morning and needed to get to bed. Harvey immediately volunteered to walk him out, but Charlie turned him down.

“You’ve got a full glass there. Go ahead and finish up.” He clapped Harvey briefly on the arm, and Harvey tried not to shiver too obviously at the contact. “I know the way out. G’night, Harvey.”

“Good night,” Harvey replied, watching him walk away. He didn’t quite manage not to stare at his ass as he left, despite his best efforts. He glanced around, wondering if anyone had noticed; it seemed everyone was absorbed in their own conversations, but then he caught Shane smirking at him. Harvey blushed and immediately turned back toward the bar. He just needed to pretend as though there was nothing to be embarrassed about, that was all. *Just act casual, Harvey.*

Unless...He knew that Shane was one of Charlie’s closest friends. Would he possibly have...talked to him about Harvey? It was ridiculous, he knew it was, he had no real reason to even think Charlie was interested. Still, he couldn’t shake the hope, and the wine was giving him ideas. He slid halfway off the barstool, then changed his mind and sat back down. Stood up again, sat back down.

“Something wrong with that stool?” Gus asked, frowning, as he passed by. “Been meaning to check ‘em, they need tightening up sometimes.”

“Yeah, something’s a little off with it,” Harvey lied, and stood up. Decision made. He headed for Shane’s booth; to his bewilderment, Shane did not look at all surprised when Harvey asked to sit down.

“It’s that kind of night, apparently,” was the only explanation Shane would offer. Still, he gestured to the seat, and Harvey sat. Shane didn’t appear interested in making the first conversational move, and Harvey struggled to find words.

“So you and Charlie are...good friends,” he began, wincing. *Smooth, doctor. Way to really bury the lede.* Shane lifted one shoulder in a half-shrug.

“I guess,” he replied. “You’d have to ask him why, I’ve never been able to figure that out.”

“Oh?” Harvey said politely, as though he’d never noticed that Shane was abrasive and sullen. Shane didn’t dignify it with a response, just raised an eyebrow and took a drink of his beer. The silence stretched on, past the point of comfort and into the realm of absurdity, as Harvey searched desperately for *anything* to say. At last, Shane gave an impatient sigh.

“Look, I’ve talked more tonight than I want to in a month. I know you didn’t come over here just to chat. If you want something, ask.”

Damn. Now or never. “I just wondered,” Harvey said, fidgeting with his wine glass, “if, um...if Charlie had maybe, uh, said anything about...you know...if there’s anyone in the village that he’s, well...interested in.”

Shane sat back in the booth, eyeing Harvey with apparent amusement. Harvey, who had felt himself turn beet red before he even began his disastrous little speech, kept his eyes firmly on the table. This had been a terrible idea, what had he been thinking, how could he have—

“Harvey,” Shane began in an uncharacteristically gentle voice, “I’m going to tell you something, and I’m not just saying this, I really, really mean it. Really.”

“OK?” Harvey said, daring to glance up at him. Shane leaned forward a little.

“You are really, really bad at this. Like, pathetically bad.” Harvey’s mouth dropped open in outrage, but Shane shook with laughter, and after a moment, Harvey found himself laughing too. It built from a little chuckle to a full-on outburst, and he had to take a moment to compose himself, wiping his eyes.

“Oh, Yoba, I am, aren’t I?” he gasped. Shane grinned at him, a surprisingly nice smile. Harvey didn’t think he’d ever seen him smile before.

“Don’t feel too bad, doc,” he said. “It takes a pathetic loser to know a pathetic loser. Charlie’s clearly got a type.” At this, Harvey’s head snapped up, and Shane smirked again.

“A type,” Harvey repeated, and Shane drained the rest of his beer. Thumping the empty glass down on the table, he stood and looked down at Harvey.

“I’m getting another,” he said. “You good?”

Harvey felt a little dazed. *A type,* Shane had said. Did that mean… "I'm OK, I think."

"Harvey." The doctor shook himself out of his daze, looking up at Shane. "Don't stress out about it. I have a feeling it's going to work out for you." Harvey stared at him, the pink back in his cheeks, and Shane snorted. "Anyway, you're gonna make yourself look even older, and Yoba knows you don't need *that.* You already look about a hundred with that 'stache."

Harvey chuckled and rolled his eyes. "Thank you, Shane."

"Don't mention it." He waved a hand over his shoulder, and Harvey wondered why, after being insulted for five minutes straight, he actually felt better. *I really am pathetic,* Harvey thought, finishing his wine. Unable to stop himself, he broke into a grin behind his glass. *But apparently, that's Charlie's type.*

* * * * *

"I still don't understand how Shane got a *blue* chicken," Maru was saying, pushing her glasses up her nose. "From white and brown ones. Either some sort of mutation occurred, or there's a deeply recessive gene and he hit the jackpot. What color are its eggs?"

"Just white," Marnie said, "but they have curly tails."

"That doesn't make any sense. I'll have to come and see him, maybe take some blood samples." The afternoon was rainy and cool, and the horde of flu and cold patients had at last died down. Maru had never been so grateful for a break. The early fall was always busy, but this year had seemed especially intense; she was shocked both she and Harvey had made it through the wave without catching something themselves. The only bright spot in all of it had been Charlie's daily visits. The soup was delicious, but not as delicious as watching Harvey turn all pink and stammery every time the farmer walked through the door. The poor man was almost forty years old, but turned into a middle-schooler in Charlie's presence. It would have been adorable if Maru wasn't so impatient for them to just *get on with it* and start dating, already.

Because it clearly wasn't one-sided. Charlie handled himself better, but he seemed just as besotted, all little smiles and sideways glances. And he brought Harvey homemade lunches every day. Oh, sure, he brought them for Maru as well, but she knew beyond a doubt that hers was just a side bonus. He was really there to see Harvey, to make sure he didn't go hungry, and even to an unromantic soul like Maru that was just precious.

Harvey refused to talk about it, in typical Harvey fashion. Once, he even went so far as to speculate that Charlie's interest was really in *Maru,* which earned him an outright laugh. Had Charlie ever walked with her down the beach and chatted until midnight? Had they shared picnic lunches by the fountain and bottles of wine at the saloon? She knew Harvey was just nervous, and she couldn't blame him, especially after his horrific last (only?) relationship. But she wished he would get up the confidence to ask Charlie out, and put all three of them out of their misery.

Harvey was currently in an appointment with Evelyn, and Marnie had stopped by for a chat. She did that, sometimes, when the weather was bad and she was stalling before heading

home. Maru didn't mind; it got old, sitting alone at the front desk on slow days, and Marnie was a sweetheart (even if she *was* nosy as hell). Apparently she'd hit her limit of talk about chicken science, because she leaned forward with the side-to-side glance that meant she had a particularly juicy tidbit of gossip.

"Speaking of farm things," Marnie said, lowering her voice conspiratorially, "I heard that farmer bought a bouquet from Pierre's this morning."

"You're kidding!"

"Caroline told me herself," Marnie confirmed, leaning back with her arms folded.

Was this *it,* then? Was he finally going to ask Harvey out? Maru didn't see how it could be anyone else. The only other person Charlie spent that much time with was Shane, and to her eyes their relationship looked decidedly platonic. A wave of giddiness washed over her; should she say something to Harvey, give him time to get ready? Or just let him be surprised? She wondered how much information had actually gotten out. "Did she have any idea who it was for?" she asked casually, dropping her chin into her hands.

"None at all. She did mention he's been spending time with Abigail lately, holed up in her room."

Maru snorted. "Bet she and Pierre *love* that." Even if Charlie was gay, which Maru would bet a not insignificant amount of money on, Caroline had a tendency to assume every boy in town was angling for her daughter.

"Of course. But, then again, he also brought Emily an amethyst the size of a fist the other day, while I was at the Stardrop. And he walked Penny home from the library last week. So who knows? I hope he's not planning to break hearts all over town."

"He's just friendly," Maru protested, holding up a half-full jar of pickles Harvey had left out. "He brings these in here all the time."

She realized her mistake instantly, but it was too late to take it back; Marnie's gaze had sharpened into something appraising, looking Maru up and down. "Oh, *does* he," she said slyly, leaning forward on the desk. "Stops in to talk with the pretty nurse, eh?"

Oh, Yoba. Marnie was going to be running all over town telling people Maru and Charlie were sleeping together by dinnertime. She shook her head wildly, getting to her feet. "No, Marnie, it isn't like that—you've got it all—"

The bell above the door tinkled, and they both turned quickly to see Charlie himself striding through the door right on cue, the usual easy grin on his sun-baked face. "Ladies," he said, shaking a few droplets from his hair like a dog. "Looks like I've missed a good chat. Invite me next time, would you? I'll bring cake."

"Only if it's pink," Marnie said airily, a twinkle in her eye.

“Is there any other kind?” he asked with a wink. As he moved further into the room, Maru’s heart leapt. There, clutched in his left hand, was a bouquet of Pierre’s best flowers. Looking closer, she noticed he’d put a bit of effort into his appearance: his shirt and jeans were clean, and his usual muddy work boots were nowhere in sight. Turning to look at Marnie, she saw a look of barely-contained glee in the rancher’s eye. She pled silently *please, keep your mouth shut, just this one time,* but Marnie looked pointedly at the bouquet and grinned. Charlie stopped short, following Marnie’s gaze back to the flowers in his hand, and then he blushed from the collar of his shirt to the roots of his hair. He fidgeted, all his easy confidence suddenly gone.

“Ah,” he said, looking at the flowers rather than either of them. “I was wondering if, um, if I could—”

At that moment, the door to the exam room opened and Evelyn walked out, followed by Harvey, still talking to her. “Other than that, you’re the absolute picture of health, Evelyn. Just keep doing whatever you’re doing, and make sure that husband of yours watches his salt.”

“Oh, easier said than done, my boy,” she sighed, but there was a smile on her face. Marnie looked like the cat that got the canary, the farmer was staring at Harvey with a deer-in-the-headlights expression, and Maru wished fervently that she’d gone home twenty minutes ago like she’d planned. Evelyn nearly ran into Charlie, stopping short and smiling up into his face.

“I’m sorry, young man! I didn’t see you there. These old eyes of mine, you know.” She moved around him and left with a little wave, the bell giving a cheerful jingle as the door closed behind her. Harvey smiled at Charlie in his usual soppy way; he clearly hadn’t noticed the flowers in the farmer’s hand yet.

“Hi, Charlie! Did you need something? Or just dropping by?”

“Um,” Charlie said, his eyes darting to Marnie and Maru; clearly he wished they didn’t have an audience. Maru wished that too, honestly, but Marnie was blocking her exit route and didn’t look inclined to go anywhere. “I’m sorry, I thought the clinic would be closed,” Charlie stammered, not meeting Harvey’s eye. “I—it’s after hours.”

“Yes, well, Evelyn’s appointment ran a little long,” Harvey said curiously, tilting his head. “Is everything all right?”

Marnie appeared unable to contain herself any longer; the words burst out of her as though they’d caused her physical pain. “I think Charlie here has a special delivery for Maru,” she said in a rush, and Harvey’s eyes finally darted to the bouquet in his hand. The effect was immediate and awful; all the light seemed to go out of him. His shoulders slumped, and his voice took on an unusually flat tone.

“Oh,” he said, “of course. Well.”

Maru and Charlie spoke at the same time. “Hang on, Harvey, I’m not—”

“We aren’t—”

As they fumbled over one another, a line of pain appeared between Harvey’s brows. “It’s all right,” he said, still in that same horrible monotone. “I...well. Anyway. Marnie and I will leave you to it. Lock up when you’re done, Maru.” He started toward the door, holding out an arm to indicate Marnie should go first, and Charlie looked alarmed.

“Wait!” he said, hands coming up in front of him. “Harvey, I wanted to talk to *you.”*

Marnie’s head whipped around so fast, Maru thought she’d likely given herself whiplash; Harvey was looking back at Charlie now, a puzzled expression on his face. Involuntarily, Maru’s hands came up to cover her mouth. She’d been right, she *knew* it!

“To...me?” Harvey repeated, and Maru wanted to jump up and down. “Why to me?”

Maru felt awkward, intruding on the moment—and judging by Marnie’s shamefaced expression, she did too—but Charlie appeared to have forgotten them completely. He took a step closer to Harvey with a smile.

“Why do you think?” he asked softly, holding out the bouquet. “These are for you.”

It was Harvey’s turn to look stunned. Charlie waited patiently, the corners of his mouth turned up. He kept the flowers steady, even though Harvey was staring at them as though he had no idea what they were, making no move to take them.

“I didn’t,” Harvey tried at last, and faltered. “I didn’t know...but you’re…”

“Please go out with me, Harvey,” Charlie whispered, moving in closer and craning his neck to look up into his face. “You’d make me so happy.”

Maru’s heart was in her throat. *Just take them, Harvey!* She shared an agonized glance with Marnie, who seemed to be in a similar state. Over Charlie’s shoulder, Harvey seemed to shake himself. His fingers twitched toward the bouquet, as though he were dying to take it, but he didn’t reach for it just yet.

“But I’m so—” he began to protest, but Charlie shook his head, and whatever Harvey had planned to say died away.

“You’re perfect,” Charlie said firmly. “You’re just what I was looking for.” He smiled again, stepping even closer, so he had to tilt his head back to maintain eye contact. “Please, Harvey.”

Harvey took a deep breath, shuddering a little on the exhale, and looked down at the flowers. “I didn’t know you felt the same,” he murmured, and his fingers curled around the stems. Charlie didn’t let go right away, and they stood inches apart, their fingers overlapping on the bouquet.

After a long moment of this, Marnie cleared her throat, shaking herself out of her reverie. “All right, missy,” she said to Maru. “You and I better clear out of here and let these two lovebirds have their moment.” As Maru came around the counter, Marnie hesitated for a

moment, then said to the general area of her feet, “I’m sorry I assumed, boys. I’m very happy for you both.”

“It’s forgotten,” Charlie said, still gazing at Harvey. “Anyway, you’ve got a rare opportunity here. You can be the first to tell everyone in town.” Marnie’s face immediately lit up with glee, while Harvey looked a little alarmed; Maru laughed, snagging Marnie by the arm as they made their way to the door.

“Good night, Charlie,” she said, pushing it open with her hip. “Harvey...I’ll see *you* tomorrow.” And for once, Harvey didn’t rise to her teasing, lost in staring at the flowers in his hand. *Finally,* Maru thought, as the door swung shut. It was almost enough to make a girl believe in romance.

* * * * *

The next day seemed as though it would never end. Without a single patient on the calendar, Harvey had nothing to do but paperwork, and for *some* reason he was totally unable to focus. Maru noticed his distraction and teased him about it, but soon lost interest.

“I’m sorry, what?” he asked for the fifteenth time that day, and she huffed a sigh, flapping a hand over her shoulder as she left the exam room.

“It’s no fun to mock you when you aren’t paying attention,” she called over her shoulder, the door swinging shut behind her. Harvey looked at the clock again, saw that only two minutes had passed since the last time, and buried his head in his arms on the desk.

He wanted to let himself look forward to their first date. He *was* looking forward to it, couldn’t think about anything else. It wasn’t even about sex, or anything physical really, at this point. He just wanted to be with him: to slide into the booth across from Charlie, smile at him, and ask him how his day had been. To clink their glasses together, reveling in the feeling of being out with him, knowing the most beautiful man in town was happy to be seen with him. To stop guarding himself, to be free to look at Charlie with all he felt plainly written on his face. He wanted it so badly he couldn’t think straight.

But...in spite of everything that had happened yesterday, in spite of the fact that he’d taken the flowers and agreed to the date, there was a gnawing fear in the pit of his stomach. Charlie had pleaded with him to accept, had whispered *you’re perfect,* and for a moment Harvey had let himself believe it—that Charlie could come to love him, that they could be happy. He’d all but floated to bed last night, filled to the brim with hope and joy. But in the light of morning, he’d awoken in a panic. He’d forgotten, in his momentary insanity, all the reasons he wasn’t good enough for Charlie: *Too old. Too boring. Too nerdy. Too scared. He deserves better. He’ll figure that out. And when he does, it’ll crush you.*

He did his best to silence that awful voice inside him, tried to summon back the happiness he’d felt just twelve hours ago. It took him some time to find, but it was still there: a brightly glowing flame in his heart, lighting him up on the inside. He made a conscious effort to listen to it instead. *He wouldn’t have asked if he wasn’t interested. Maybe it’ll be fine. It’ll definitely be fine. Probably.*

Just as his embattled inner monologue officially threatened to send him over the edge, he heard the clinic bell ring, and an ear-splitting wail filled the air. “Harvey!” Maru shouted, though Harvey was already on his feet. “Vincent fell and cut his leg, might need stitches!”

As he headed for the waiting room, Harvey felt a little ashamed of himself for his first thought, which was: *Oh thank Yoba, a distraction.*

Interminable as it seemed, the day did eventually end. As Harvey held the door for Maru, intending to let her out before he locked it behind her, she abruptly turned and threw her arms around his neck. He was so stunned, he froze completely, hand still on the door.

“I’m so happy for you,” she whispered, and then just as quickly, she released him and left. He stood staring after her for a moment, wondering what in the world had gotten into her. Well, that was a puzzle for another day. Locking the door, he headed up to shower and second-guess all the clothes he’d picked out the night before. Was a tie too much? What a stupid question, he wore a tie every day. Should he just wear his normal clothes? Did that make him look too much like a doctor? Did Charlie *like* that he looked like a doctor? (Oh, Yoba. Was that what this was about, did he have a *thing* for doctors? Would that...actually be so bad?) Should he switch out the tie for his favorite one, the one with little airplanes on it? Was that quirky, or just dorky? How did people *do* this all the time? In the end, he settled on a white shirt with a navy cardigan over it, a black tie (he was just too nervous about the airplanes), burgundy pants, and black shoes. He ran his fingers through his wet hair, trying to keep it out of his face. There: he looked fairly presentable, didn’t he?

He cast a critical eye at the mirror, trying to look at himself as a potential date. He was definitely getting older, no doubt about that. He had lines around his eyes and mouth that he felt were probably a bit premature, a result of his stress level. He ate mostly junk, which he knew he shouldn’t, but he ate infrequently enough and was tall enough that he never gained weight. A college friend using the word *beanpole* came to mind, and it still fit, he supposed. He knew the mustache was a little aging, but he’d grown it during residency to lend his younger self some authority, and now he felt naked without it. The glasses made him look older, too. But it wasn’t all bad; he still had a full, thick head of hair, no signs of thinning, and his skin was clear. If he squinted, he could *almost* see someone Charlie might want to go out with.

Harvey had planned to arrive at the Stardrop ten minutes early, hoping to beat Charlie there and maybe get a glass of liquid courage in him. The plan went to hell as soon as he left the clinic, though, as Charlie was waiting right outside. Harvey was so focused on his plan—walk to Stardrop, get table, get wine, drink wine—he couldn’t think of one single spontaneous thing to say. He just stared like an idiot at Charlie’s back, butterflies rioting in his stomach.

As the clinic door swung shut behind him, Charlie turned, his eyebrows shooting up. “Hey, you! I didn’t know you were there!” he exclaimed, his face splitting in a beaming smile. “We’re both a little early, I guess. You ready?”

Harvey allowed himself a moment to just take him in. Charlie had dressed up too; he still wore jeans, but his usual flannel had been replaced by a deep green, fine-knit sweater. His curls were still slightly damp from the shower, and his shoes were brown Chelsea boots Harvey had never seen before. The green sweater set off Charlie's skin and hair in an unfairly handsome way, and Harvey revised his earlier assessment: no matter how he tried to dress himself up, Charlie was *way* out of his league.

"You didn't have to walk me to the Stardrop," he said, wincing at how rude he sounded, but Charlie's grin only widened.

"Oh, we're not going to the Stardrop. Change of plans." He jerked his head in the opposite direction, toward the road to Cindersap Forest. "C'mon." Bewildered, Harvey fell into step beside him.

They walked mostly in silence, save for a little inane chat about the weather. Harvey was so nervous he could barely put one foot in front of the other, but Charlie seemed totally at ease. They passed Haley and Emily's house, Kent and Jodi's house, Marnie's ranch. Harvey assumed they were taking a circuitous route to the farm, but Charlie passed right by the southern entrance, still heading west. Where on earth were they going? Up a tree? As they approached the cliffs on the edge of the forest, Charlie stooped and shoved some brush out of the way. He glanced around before winking at Harvey, putting a finger theatrically to his lips.

"Our little secret," he said wryly, before squeezing through the gap left by the brush and out of sight. Harvey stared as he wound his way into even more trees; had Charlie lost his mind? "Come on, almost there!" Charlie called back to him, and Harvey shook himself and followed suit. He followed the sound of Charlie's crunching footsteps, and as he passed through a dense little cluster of trees, he stopped in his tracks.

There was a clearing here, one Harvey had never known about. He doubted anyone in town did, though clearly someone had once; there was an odd, ancient-looking shrine at the far end, presiding over a small, clear pond. But the biggest surprise was right in front of him. Charlie was sitting cross-legged on a rough wool blanket, a wicker basket at his side. Spread out across the blanket were covered dishes of food: Harvey could make out a plate of cheeses, a bowl of grapes, a baguette with some kind of oil to dip it in, and something pasta-based. A bottle of wine and two glasses perched on a nearby stump, and Harvey saw that it was his favorite vintage, the one they'd shared at the Stardrop months ago. A lump came to his throat as he looked over all the work Charlie had done; when at last he met the farmer's gaze again, Charlie was wearing an impossibly gentle smile.

"I hope this is okay," he said, gesturing around with one arm. "I just thought you might not want Pam and Gus and everyone else staring at us on our first date."

"You…" Harvey's voice came out as a horrible squeak, and he cleared his throat with a wince. Charlie hid a grin with his hand. "You did all this for me?"

"Of course," Charlie said, a little shyly. "Who else?" As Harvey continued to stand there like one of the trees, swaying a little, Charlie patted the blanket beside him. "You want to have a seat?"

It wasn't a booth, and nobody in town could see them, but in all other ways it was essentially the date Harvey had pictured. They chatted amicably about their days while Charlie filled their glasses; Harvey kept his vague (damned doctor-patient confidentiality), and Charlie enthused about the eggs his chickens had begun producing. Gradually, Harvey felt a little of his nervousness begin to ebb away. He'd been able to talk to Charlie before, after all. Maybe that part of their relationship didn't have to change.

When all the food was uncovered and each of them held a full glass, Harvey summoned his courage. He held his wine out in front of him, offering it for a toast with a sheepish smile.

"To, um...you," he said lamely, wishing he'd put some thought into it before raising his glass. The corners of Charlie's mouth turned up.

"To us," he corrected gently, and Harvey felt the little flame in his heart grow to a roaring fire.

"Us," he agreed, and they clinked their glasses together at last.

It was an excellent dinner. The food was all fresh and delicious, obviously straight from Charlie's farm, and the wine went down very easily. By the time they finished everything and set their empty dishes aside, Harvey felt a pleasantly heavy warmth radiating through his limbs. Charlie was gazing at him, chin propped in his hand, and Harvey fought the instinct to look away. Instead, he let himself gaze back, certain all of his emotions were showing on his face.

Charlie let out a long, happy sigh. "I could get used to this," he said softly.

"What, delicious picnics in a beautiful secret forest? I agree."

"You," Charlie countered, "looking at me like that." He smiled and ducked his head, and Harvey thought he could make out a pink tinge to his tanned face. "You look at me like I'm fascinating."

Harvey blinked in surprise; did Charlie genuinely not know? "You *are,"* he said, feeling as though he were stating the obvious. "Charlie. You're the most interesting person I've ever met. In fact, I…" He trailed off, suddenly too self-conscious to continue. Even in the twilight of the forest, it was too difficult to say these things face-to-face. Charlie searched his face for a moment; then, apparently figuring something out, he lay down flat on the blanket.

"Want to lie down with me?" he suggested, and as soon as Harvey did, he understood the genius of this plan. Lying side-by-side, just a few inches between them, he could stare up at the stars and talk to *them* rather than to Charlie. It was easier when he didn't have to look, and the wine helped him be brave.

"It's just," he began, haltingly, "I don't really understand *why me* . You could have had anyone in town, and I'm so…" He could hear Charlie take a breath to interrupt him, but he barreled on. He wanted to put words to this, to tell Charlie his fears, bring them out into the

light. If he was ever going to get past them, he needed Charlie to understand. “I’m not like you, Charlie. I’m kind of boring, and I’m probably the biggest dork in town. Not to mention that I’m a decade older than you, and not getting any younger. I just. How can I be what you want?”

He waited, heart in his throat. Charlie was silent for so long, he began to wonder if the wine had lulled him to sleep; at last, he felt something touch his hand. Charlie had shifted his arm over, his pinky finger brushing against Harvey’s own. He didn’t go any further, just lay there with their two fingers touching. It felt like the most unbearably intimate touch of Harvey’s life.

“I told myself, when I came to town,” Charlie whispered, “that I was going to focus on the farming. I had a lot of work to do if I wanted to reinvent myself, and I couldn’t afford to get distracted by anything else.

“But then on my second day in town—hadn’t even unpacked yet—I met this guy. He was kind, and so smart, and he had the prettiest eyes. And, yeah, he was a little awkward at first, but you know, I kind of liked it? It was nice to know I wasn’t the only one nervous to meet new people.” Charlie’s voice changed a little, and Harvey could tell he was smiling. “As a bonus, he was really tall, and he had great hair, and glasses. Did I ever tell you I had a thing for glasses?”

“I don’t think so,” Harvey managed.

“Well, I tried my hardest, but I got distracted. It got to where I was going into town every day just to see him. One time I brought him a jar of pickles, and he got so excited, I went home and built two more preserving jars. Just so I could always have some on hand.”

Harvey rolled his head to gape at Charlie, who was grinning sheepishly. “You told me you just happened to have extra!”

“I totally lied,” Charlie laughed, and Harvey laughed too, in spite of himself. The moment passed, and Harvey went back to staring at the sky; Charlie went on.

“I had just started to remind myself that I had work to do, that I couldn’t afford to get so wrapped up in someone, when this guy had to go and rescue my dog. As if I needed to be even more infatuated.”

“I didn’t really—”

“Shh, this is my story.” He stroked his pinky across Harvey’s again. “And then he told me all about how much of a shit his ex was, and all about his family, and all I could think was *somebody needs to take better care of this man,* and then I thought, *maybe it could be me.”*

Harvey was speechless; mortifyingly, his eyes felt wet.

“I want it to be me, Harvey,” Charlie breathed. The breeze lifted his words up and away, and Harvey shivered in a way that had nothing to do with the wind. He so desperately wanted to say something. Charlie had poured his heart out, had called himself *infatuated,* had all but

asked permission to take care of him. And Harvey couldn't muster a single word. He was the worst date in the world.

"Hey," Charlie prompted gently, "you don't have to take my word for it." Harvey turned his head again, a questioning look on his face, and Charlie smiled. "You're a doctor. Diagnose me." Harvey stared, uncomprehending, until Charlie rolled further into his space.

"What's your medical opinion?" he murmured, and Harvey understood.

He lifted his fingers, trembling a little, to Charlie's face; they stroked over his lightly-stubbled skin with reverence. "Temperature's a little higher than it should be, in this weather," Harvey began, and Charlie's smile widened. Their eyes met. "Dilated pupils, although that could be from the dark, or the wine." He licked his lips, staring at Charlie's mouth. They were so close, just inches apart now. "Shallow respiration…" His fingers stilled on Charlie's jaw, and wordlessly, Charlie caught them in his own. Slowly, so slowly, he pulled them down to his neck. Harvey's fingers pressed in gently, and he spent a moment just letting himself feel it.

"Elevated heart rate," he finished, just barely audible. Charlie let his eyes fall shut, an expression of deep contentment on his face.

"What's your diagnosis, doctor?" he whispered, still holding Harvey's hand against his own skin. Harvey felt the butterflies rise up in his stomach again, but a different species this time, one with much softer wings.

"Symptoms support the patient's diagnosis," he replied, and as Charlie's eyes opened over a radiant smile, his entire body felt alight with hope.

Chapter End Notes

We're here! They're dating! Things are going to get reeeeeeeeal fluffy. I hope you're ready.

Thanks so much for sticking with me for a full week! Sharing these has been the highlight of my days. I'll keep giving warnings for specific content, but many (most?) of the future chapters will contain NSFW content. Just FYI!

Tomorrow: second and third dates, and first...other things.

Chapter 10: Fall, Year 1

Chapter Summary

A second date, a third date, and some firsts.

Chapter Notes

Remember I mentioned we were going to start seeing NSFW content pop up pretty regularly? Here we go!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Gus had seen a lot of things in his 30 years running the Stardrop Saloon. He'd seen countless trysts, people sneaking off together to do Yoba-knew-what (in their homes if he was lucky, in the storeroom if he wasn't). He'd seen Charlie's grandfather, the old farmer, dragging himself in for his evening beer and sometimes falling asleep right in the booth during the busy summers. He'd seen more vomit than a person rightly needed to see in a lifetime. But he'd never, in the six years he'd known the man, seen the village doctor on a date. Until tonight.

He was relieved, honestly. Watching Harvey sit at the bar, transparently hoping for a glimpse of Charlie, had been getting more and more painful. He'd worried Doc might be barking up the wrong tree; he'd asked around, but none of the other patrons had known whether Charlie liked men. But apparently Harvey's patience had paid off, because the two of them were currently cozied up in a booth together, gazing starrily at each other over a bottle of wine.

It surprised him a little, if he was being honest. Oh, Charlie was a good sort, friendly to everyone in town. He was thoughtful, too, always bringing folks their favorite things. Apparently he'd asked around about what Gus liked, and had been eager to tell him about the orange trees he'd planted, which would produce next year. Gus was glad to have him as a neighbor, and could see why Harvey liked him, but he hadn't altogether expected the attraction to run both ways. Harvey wasn't bad-looking, for a man, and he was smart and kind. But people tended not to notice him. Gus could sympathize; standing behind a bar made you invisible too, sometimes, though at least Gus had a loud voice and a sociable demeanor in his favor. Poor Harvey hardly ever even made it out of his clinic, and when he did, he just sat at the bar drinking wine by himself. If Gus had been a betting man, he'd have put money on Charlie taking up with one of the young folks in town, someone his own age who liked to get out and talk to people.

He was glad he'd been wrong. Doc Harvey needed someone, anybody could see that. And he looked so different tonight: happy, animated, laughing into his wine as Charlie told him a

story. For his part, Charlie looked over the moon about his dinner companion; he hadn't taken his eyes off Harvey once, hadn't even glanced around the room. Twice, as Gus looked over, he'd lightly stroked the back of Harvey's hand where it rested on the table, and both times Harvey had looked about ready to swoon. They looked about as smitten as any couple Gus had ever seen in the saloon, and he was happy for them.

For a while, as Gus finished preparing their dinners (salad and spaghetti for both of them), he had to step away into the kitchen. He found himself hoping that Pam took a night off from coming in. While he didn't think anyone in town was a homophobe—they were an accepting bunch, and certainly everyone would be pleased Harvey seemed to have found love at last—Pam would likely have something to say, loudly, after a few beers. And while it would probably be something well-intentioned, he couldn't imagine shy Doc Harvey reacting well to being called out in the middle of a date.

Gus emerged from the kitchen with his heavy tray, loaded up with pasta and salad and bread. Emily reached to take it from him, but he shook his head and winked at her. "I'll take this one out, Em," he said, coming around the bar. "It's a special occasion!" Neither Charlie nor Harvey seemed to notice him approaching until he was right beside their table, as they were still occupied in grinning at each other. They finally looked up when he set the bread basket on the table in front of them, both looking a little startled.

"Hello, boys!" Gus greeted them, delivering their plates of food. "On the house tonight, my friends." Harvey's mouth opened in surprise, and Charlie shook his head.

"Gus, if you keep giving me free food—"

"Oh, that's enough, young fella. It's my restaurant, I can give it away whenever I want. And it does me good to see a happy new couple in here," he added, at which Harvey turned an impressive shade of pink. Charlie glanced at his date, grinning, and gave his forearm a quick squeeze before turning back to Gus.

"You're the best, Gus."

"Well, maybe besides your boyfriend there." Gus winked, and Harvey's mouth opened slightly. Charlie's eyes darted to him, and Gus realized they'd only just started dating—it was maybe a bit early for anyone to be using that word. He hoped he hadn't made things awkward, him and his big mouth.

But Charlie's smile just softened a little; he didn't look put out at all. "My boyfriend loves your food enough not to disagree with me," he said, and the look on the Doc's *face*— he looked about ready to float up out of the booth. He stared at Charlie, and Charlie turned back to him, and after standing there in silence for ten seconds Gus cleared his throat.

"I'll leave you to it, then," he said, and thumped Doc Harvey on the shoulder before retreating to the bar. As he took up his place behind the taps and went to refill Willy's beer, he stole one last glance at the table. Charlie had tucked into his food, and Harvey had a forkful of salad in his hand, but he seemed to have forgotten all about it; he was staring at Charlie as though he couldn't stand to look away. It brought a smile to Gus's face.

Good for you, Doc.

* * * * *

Charlie,

I have a surprise for you. Meet me by the railroad tracks at 4 PM.

Harvey

Standing by the mailbox with the note in one hand and his coffee in the other, Charlie sleepily puzzled over its meaning. What in the world? A surprise, but not until the *end of the day?* Working the fields for the next ten hours was going to be unbearable. It wasn't like Harvey to be mysterious—everything he felt showed on his face, for one thing—but whatever it was he'd cooked up, Charlie was dying to see it. Could they be taking a train somewhere? Did this have something to do with the bathhouse by the train station? They hadn't even kissed yet, so jumping right ahead to fooling around in a public spa seemed like a big leap, but Charlie was game for whatever.

They'd been on two dates so far: the one in the forest, and dinner at the Stardrop. Both had gone, in Charlie's estimation, extremely well. Harvey seemed to be gaining a bit of confidence, talking more easily and meeting Charlie's eyes more. That first night, lying on the blanket in the Secret Woods and letting Harvey feel his pulse, Charlie had thought their first kiss might happen. It hadn't, and that was fine. It also hadn't happened when he'd walked Harvey home after dinner, though the doctor had leaned toward him for a moment before awkwardly brushing a hand down his arm and telling him good night. This was also fine; however long it took Harvey to be ready, Charlie was prepared to wait. He couldn't help it if he was *extremely distracted* by how badly he wanted to make out with him in the meantime, though.

Well, he had to try to put it out of his mind. The fall was in full swing, and there was more to do on the farm than Charlie had ever imagined. The chickens were producing eggs every day, and loved to graze in the little patch of grass outside their coop. At first, Charlie had worried that Bones might hurt them, but a couple of tussles with Pizza had scared the dog away from the coop for good. Fortunately, Pizza's aggression didn't extend to Charlie; he was downright *cuddly* as long as he was well-fed , actually, always running over to beg for scratches or treats. The Spice Girls were an affable bunch too, and so Charlie generally got the eggs out unscathed. The first of the fall harvests were underway, grapes and bok choy, and he had a half-baked plan of trying to make wine from his grapes. Maybe from the wild blackberries that were starting to ripen all around town, too. Harvey would be pleased.

Standing on the path between the house and the fields, gazing over everything he'd planted and built in the last six months, Charlie felt a sense of pride he'd never had in his old life. It still wasn't much, but it was his, every inch of it put together with his own two hands. There was a wholesomeness to farming that appealed to him, too, if he was honest. At Joja, he'd known his work was putting money into the hands of people who'd burn the world to the ground if it brought them a profit. On the farm, he grew good food for people who needed to eat, spent the money he earned back in the town, and cared for his animals as gently and

lovingly as he could. It felt good, doing something valuable for his little community, rather than shuffling around papers and making calls until he could go home at five.

Although, he thought, hoisting his shovel over his shoulder grimly, there had been a lot less chicken shit in the cubicle.

At 3:45 that afternoon Charlie bid goodbye to Robin, who had agreed to build him a new silo for chicken feed before the winter came around, and headed north from her house. He rarely went up to the railroad tracks unless he could miraculously spare the time for a soak at the spa. Today, he'd stopped work a little earlier than usual to take a long shower before Harvey's "surprise." He didn't know what it was, but he doubted it would be enhanced by the scents of chicken coop and field dirt. The walk through the mountains was nice; he sometimes forgot how pretty it was up here, since he was usually headed for either Robin's house or the mines, always on a mission. Lewis had cautioned him once about working too hard, as his grandfather apparently had. He really should take some time to appreciate the scenery more, he thought. With the leaves changing, it was almost obnoxiously picturesque.

As he came through the gap in the cliffs toward the train station, he saw Harvey, standing with his back to town and gazing up at the sky. Charlie's heart stuttered a little at the sight of him, as it always did lately. He took a moment to appreciate the lines of Harvey's body: long and lean, elegant in every way. In spite of his work hunched over patients and computers, his posture was impeccable. Boarding school probably did that to a person, Charlie supposed. Watching Harvey stare up at the clouds, Charlie wondered what he was thinking about. Did he still wish he could be up there flying around? Or had he really accepted his lot in life, as he claimed he had?

Charlie had nearly reached him now, and Harvey turned, hearing his footfalls. The doctor's face broke into a wide smile as he approached, and he thrust his hands into his pockets, which Charlie had learned was code for *I'm so nervous I don't know what to do with my hands*. "Right on time," he said, sounding oddly relieved. Had he thought Charlie might not come?

"Are you my surprise?" Charlie teased, pulling up beside him. "Not that I'd mind that, of course. You're usually pretty surprising."

Harvey laughed, and Charlie could instantly tell he was nervous. "No, no, it's coming soon," he assured him, squinting up at the sky again. "Actually, is that...yes, that's it!"

As the small black shape against the sun slowly descended towards them, Charlie's jaw dropped. Harvey hadn't been kidding, he *did* have a surprise: he'd rented them a fucking hot air balloon. They stepped back, out of the rapidly-expanding shadow on the ground.

"Harvey," Charlie managed at last, "what…"

"I saw an ad in the paper for these balloon rides," Harvey said, grinning at him, "and I knew I had to take you."

Charlie still hadn't formed a sufficient response to this when the balloon touched down. It was enormous and blue, worryingly patched in a few places; a tiny man in a purple suit leapt out of the basket with surprising agility. He strode forward and shook hands with Harvey, beaming.

"Marcello's Balloon Rentals at your service!" he declared, waving an arm at the balloon. Charlie had the dazed thought that maybe this guy should spend less effort on his personal aesthetic, which was the closest to Tim Burton's Willy Wonka he'd ever seen in real life, and more on balloon maintenance. "It's all yours for two hours."

"Um," Charlie began.

"You've flown a balloon before," the man—Marcello?—said to Harvey, as though it were such a silly question he shouldn't even bother asking. Harvey looked slightly alarmed.

"No, I haven't," Harvey corrected him, and the man shrugged.

"Burner," he said carelessly, pointing toward a lever at the top of the basket, "valve. Burner goes up, valve goes down. Don't do either too fast." Before Charlie could ask any of his approximately five thousand questions, Marcello strode away, muttering something about the saloon. Charlie looked at Harvey, who stared back at him wide-eyed, and then they both burst out laughing.

"We're definitely gonna die," Charlie gasped, wiping his eyes with the back of his hand.

"Not *definitely. Probably,* at most."

Charlie managed to compose himself, eyeing the balloon. It wasn't as though it didn't sound fun; he thought it probably would be, but he was stuck on one important detail. "Don't take this the wrong way, Harvey," he said tentatively, "but you're afraid of heights, yeah?"

Harvey's expression sobered, and Charlie hoped he hadn't offended him. "Yeah," Harvey echoed, "I am. But...I've let that hold me back for a long time, and I don't want to anymore." He gave Charlie a little smile. "I'm determined to get past it. I wanted to do this with you. Provided you want to?" he added, his expression clouding a little.

Charlie felt a surge of helpless affection wash over him, and he was sure it showed on his face. He stepped closer to Harvey, reaching out and giving his wrist a light squeeze. "Of course. This is the most romantic thing anyone's ever done for me. I can't believe you went to all this trouble."

"It was no trouble," Harvey insisted. "Although, ask me again after we've flown this thing. I was sort of under the impression that *he* would be driving." Charlie laughed again, and they both clambered awkwardly into the basket. Only *after* Charlie had hoisted himself bodily over the side did he notice that there were little footholds woven into the wicker. *Smooth, Charles.*

The burner was shockingly loud—"Shit!" they cried in unison, Harvey releasing the lever as though it had burned him—but it turned out it was, after all, pretty easy to get a hot air

balloon off the ground. Once they had the fire going, it wanted to rise, and all they had to do was ease off it now and again to keep it from rising too quickly. Charlie decided not to worry about the descent just yet, and to relax and enjoy the view.

“Wow, I’ve never seen the Valley from this angle,” he remarked, looking over the edge at the shrinking houses. He could see the farm from here, looking more like a model from a toy train set than anything else. A fast-moving dot hurtled across the fields, and he waved to Bones, grinning. “This is actually really cool! What do you th—”

He cut himself off as he turned, because what Harvey thought was obvious; he was ashen-faced and shaking from head to toe, clinging to the nearest cable with one white-knuckled hand and covering his eyes with the other. Charlie kicked himself for having been so caught up in the view that he’d forgotten Harvey’s fear. He crossed the basket towards him, reaching out a tentative hand. “Hey, Harvey,” he said gently, “are you okay?”

With a strangled whimper, Harvey let go of the cable and flung himself into Charlie’s arms. Charlie caught him, settling back against the basket and rubbing little soothing circles into his back. While he was sorry Harvey was frightened, he couldn’t deny that it felt fantastic to hold him, after months of imagining what it would be like to have him in his arms. He only wished poor Harvey could stop trembling.

“It’s—we’re so high up,” came Harvey’s muffled voice, mostly delivered into Charlie’s shirt. Charlie stroked a hand over his hair.

“It’s all right, darlin’,” he said, and then paused. *Darlin’?* He’d never called anyone that before in his life. Had farming really gotten into his blood enough that he was going to start talking like a country song? Good lord. It felt natural, though, so he decided to just roll with it. “I’m not going to let you go. We’re safe.”

Harvey let out a shaky breath. “Good thing you’re brave enough for the both of us,” he said, turning his head enough to make eye contact. “That’s...part of why I like you so much.”

Charlie felt warm all over, in spite of the chilly breeze at their altitude. He beamed at Harvey, running fingers through his hair again. “Everyone’s brave in different ways,” he assured him. “You didn’t even flinch when I showed up in your office covered in burns and goo, if you’ll recall. I couldn’t even stand to look at them.”

“I’m not sure having a strong stomach is the same thing as being brave,” Harvey said with a little laugh, but he looked slightly less pale. “But I think I can take a look now.” He straightened up and threaded his fingers into Charlie’s, squeezing his hand tightly. Charlie felt a little giddy, and then immediately felt like a silly kid— *oh em gee, he’s holding my hand!*— but oh well. Harvey took a step toward the edge of the basket with his eyes screwed shut, opened them, and looked down.

He clearly *wasn't* ready for it; his hand shook hard enough to send vibrations up Charlie’s arm. Charlie gave him a reassuring little squeeze, stepping closer to press his shoulder into Harvey’s arm. They stood in silence for a while, gazing down at the Valley and waiting for Harvey to get acclimated. A flapping sound behind them caught Charlie’s attention, and they turned to see something amazing: a whole flock of white birds in V-formation, flying past

their balloon at eye level. Gulls? Terns? Charlie wasn't really up on his waterfowl, but they were beautiful, sailing by with astounding grace. He stole a glance at Harvey, who was watching them with a transfixed expression.

“This is incredible,” Harvey whispered, and Charlie murmured his agreement. It *was* incredible; it was like something out of a fairy tale. It was 5 PM on a Friday, and in another life, Charlie would have been getting ready to leave his shitty cubicle and return home to his beige apartment. Instead, he was floating through flocks of birds in a hot air balloon with his new boyfriend. He didn’t know what he’d done to deserve his new life, but he felt a gratitude so powerful it made him weak in the knees.

Gradually, Harvey’s shaking subsided. His hand, still tucked into Charlie’s, stopped trembling and loosened its death grip. Charlie prepared himself for Harvey to let go, a little disappointed—but, to his surprise, he didn’t. They leaned against the edge of the basket, hand in hand, until Harvey blew out a deep sigh. Charlie turned to look at him, tilting his head in a silent question.

“I wanted to impress you,” Harvey explained, with a rueful quirk of his mustache. Charlie felt the idiot grin spreading over his face, was powerless to stop it. He gave Harvey’s fingers a squeeze.

“You did,” he said simply, and Harvey met his eyes at last. Charlie expected him to argue, but he just went on gazing at Charlie, his expression unreadable. They were so close, almost nose to nose now, but he kept himself still. Somewhere, deep down, he needed to know that Harvey really wanted him: that he hadn’t been coming on too strong, hadn’t misread the signals. So he waited, almost holding his breath, *wanting* so badly he couldn’t stand it. It had all been leading up to this one surreal moment, suspended a thousand feet above the world, time at a standstill. “Harvey,” he whispered, not sure what he was going to say—but it broke the spell, and before he had time to form another word, Harvey leaned in and kissed him.

It was so, so much better than he’d ever imagined. Harvey’s mouth was soft and warm, his mustache a faint brush above Charlie’s upper lip. Something was *different* about kissing Harvey, not just the thrill of a new partner; Charlie didn’t know what it was, but he knew he needed to investigate it, thoroughly. He felt as though his heart might pound out of his chest. Harvey still hadn’t released Charlie’s hand, hadn’t yet put his arms around him, but he was close enough that his body radiated heat through Charlie’s shirt. It ended far too soon, and as Harvey pulled back, Charlie’s eyes fluttered reluctantly open. Harvey’s cheeks were flushed pink, a shy smile on his face; he looked nervous, but he also looked *happy,* and Charlie found it completely irresistible.

“Was that all r—” Harvey began, but Charlie had already dragged him back in, arms around his neck. Harvey’s own arms went around his back, his hands warm and solid along Charlie’s spine, and there was nothing chaste and gentle in this second kiss: they both seemed to be trying to get as close as possible, to crawl inside the other man’s skin. As Harvey pulled him flush against his body, Charlie’s mouth opened in surprise and Harvey took advantage of the opportunity to slide his tongue against Charlie’s. He tasted like—well, like Harvey, like something unique and right and hopelessly addictive. The farmer knew there was no reason to be surprised by Harvey’s skill—for all his blushing shyness, he *had* been in at least one

long-term relationship—but all the same, it didn't quite fit with his image, with the cardigans and model airplanes and endearingly awkward flirtation. It was like opening a longed-for gift and finding something different, but *even better,* inside.

"God, you're a good kisser," Charlie gasped, fingers clutched tightly in Harvey's shirt. "Why haven't we been kissing this whole time?"

"Good things come to those who wait," Harvey almost purred, his lips against Charlie's jaw, and *oh,* he was right, wasn't he? Charlie felt as though he'd been waiting for this for *years.* Relationships definitely moved at a slower pace in Stardew Valley—in the past, he'd usually gotten partners into bed before the end of the first date—but he found he didn't mind the change. Harvey was special, not just a fling; he'd had his heart broken badly, and Charlie was beginning to believe he held it in his hands. Standing here, wrapped in his arms and feeling the full weight of their six months spent building a friendship, he understood why some traditions stood the test of time.

The feeling of Harvey's mouth against the skin of his neck jolted Charlie back to the present. Things were rapidly heading in a different direction, and if they didn't slow down soon, they were going to have to keep this balloon a *lot* longer. He opened his mouth to say as much, but at that moment Harvey's hands slid down his back to lower regions, and his words were swallowed up by his breathless groan. "Is that so?" Harvey asked with a huff of laughter.

"Harvey," Charlie tried again, "ah—I don't want to, ah, interrupt, but—we are still in a balloon, and—"

"And?" Harvey prompted, pulling their hips flush together. Charlie's eyes nearly rolled back in his head.

"Have you seen my boyfriend?" he laughed, his hands coming up to tangle in Harvey's thick hair. "Handsome fella, tall, kinda shy?"

"Mm, no, but he sounds intriguing."

"Oh, he is."

"I heard he's a doctor, too."

"It's true. He's a real catch."

"Good in bed?"

Charlie laughed, though it came out as more of a gasp. "Don't know yet, but I'm optimistic. I'm *dying* to find out, actually."

Harvey pulled back just enough to look into Charlie's eyes; his own were lit with humor and something darker, something that made tendrils of anticipation curl through Charlie's stomach. "Then we'd better land this damn balloon."

Landing the balloon turned out to be something of an ordeal, since they'd been given next to no instruction and were both hopelessly aroused, but eventually they got it tethered to the

ground—forty-five minutes late. Marcello didn't seem to notice their flushed faces and swollen lips, distracted as he was by berating them for their lateness. Harvey ended the diatribe by simply giving him an extra few bills and walking away, tugging Charlie behind him with their fingers intertwined. Charlie let himself be led in companionable silence, still marveling at this new, confident Harvey, until they reached the fork in the path that could take them either to the clinic or the farm.

"Your place or mine?" Charlie asked, trying for a light tone to mask his sudden nervousness. He wanted Harvey—wanted him so badly he could hardly walk straight, in fact—but he'd spent so much time imagining it, he almost couldn't believe it was happening.

"Yours," Harvey blurted immediately, then promptly turned red. Charlie couldn't hide his smile; *there* was the Harvey he knew. "I mean," Harvey continued, "if you want. My place is just so…"

"Clinical?" Charlie suggested, jokingly.

"Something like that."

"My place it is, then," he agreed, and they headed down the path together, hand in hand.

When they arrived at the farm, Bones bounded up to greet them, barking joyfully. Harvey let go of Charlie's hand to crouch down and scratch his ears, cooing nonsense, and Charlie took a moment to drink it in. The last time Harvey had visited the farm, it had been to stitch up an injured Bones, and they'd barely known each other, really. The Harvey who stood there today was almost a different person: not just the town doctor, but his *boyfriend,* so much warmer and funnier and more open than the last time. As Charlie watched him, petting Bones absently as he gazed out over the crops in the fading light, the thought entered his mind unbidden: *He looks like he belongs here.* He shook himself mentally and followed it up with *slow down, Charles, you're getting ahead of yourself,* but the thought settled somewhere in the back of his mind.

Harvey drifted away from Bones, coming to join Charlie on the porch. The two men exchanged a long look before Charlie's face broke into a giddily nervous smile.

"Do you want to come in?" he offered. "I could make dinner, I've got the stuff for that Super Meal thing, or…"

"I think we can just—wait, *Super Meal thing?"* Harvey interrupted himself incredulously. "My favorite dinner? I never even told you what it was called!"

"Ah," Charlie hedged, rubbing a hand over the back of his neck. No wonder Harvey hadn't told him what it was called; it was a seriously dumb name, not that that was Harvey's fault. "Yeah, um, I started watching the Queen of Sauce most days, after you mentioned the ingredients. I was hoping she'd give out the recipe." He smiled, a little sheepishly. "She finally did, couple days ago. Fortunately I had all the stuff growing already."

Harvey looked thunderstruck. “You grew three separate crops for me,” he pressed.

“Well, I was already going to grow one of them.”

“And you watched a cooking show every morning trying to sleuth out what I liked?”

“Uh, yeah.”

“You did all that because of an offhand comment I made a month ago? That’s so much work, Charlie!”

Charlie’s mouth quirked up in a shy smile. “But I knew it would make you happy,” he said, and Harvey looked at him with the starriest eyes Charlie had ever seen. He stepped forward, pushing Charlie back almost against the door.

“Inside,” he ordered, in a tone that sent all of Charlie’s blood rushing south again, “bed.”

In Charlie’s bedroom, ties and jackets and shoes discarded, they stood wrapped in each other’s arms again. They kissed in an unhurried, exploratory way. They had all the time in the world, Charlie thought, and he wanted to try absolutely *everything.* Harvey seemed just as eager as he was, and it was glorious, this feeling of being really wanted. His fingers moved to Harvey’s shirt buttons, and as he slipped the first one open, he felt Harvey go very still. He pulled back, searching Harvey’s face.

“We don’t have to do anything you don’t want,” he reassured him. “We can do everything or nothing. It’s totally up to you.”

“No, it isn’t that,” Harvey said, reaching up to cover Charlie’s hands with his own. “I want...all of it. Really, I do. It’s just been a long time, that’s all.” He ducked his head, smiling ruefully. “Honestly, I’m afraid I’m going to go off like a shot.”

Charlie grinned, feeling some of his nervousness dissipate. “I’ll consider it a compliment if you do,” he promised, leaning their foreheads together. “Anyway, sweetheart, I’m in the same state. If you couldn’t already tell.”

Harvey huffed a little laugh, then released Charlie’s hands and settled his own on the farmer’s hips; Charlie took this as permission to keep going, and he worked open the rest of Harvey’s shirt buttons with slow, reverent care. As the last button came undone, Harvey undid his own cuffs, then let Charlie push the shirt off his shoulders. Charlie’s fingers skimmed down Harvey’s chest, and he took a moment to appreciate the sight before him. Harvey’s skin was pale, though flushed pink with arousal—and maybe a little embarrassment, Charlie thought, seeing the way Harvey determinedly avoided his eyes—and lightly dusted with brown hair. His stomach was flatter than Charlie had expected, a bit skinny but surprisingly firm. There was a faint scar, a few inches long, on his lower abdomen; Charlie brushed his fingers over it, silently questioning.

“Appendectomy when I was 12,” Harvey explained. “My first real hospital experience. I was fascinated.”

Charlie smiled, dropping a kiss to his clavicle. “You know, you should really get your shirts tailored,” he said, reveling in the feeling of his hands sliding over that warm, smooth skin. “I had no idea what you were hiding under here.” He glanced up to see Harvey roll his eyes, but he looked pleased.

“Let’s see what *you’re* hiding,” he countered, and began unbuttoning Charlie’s own shirt. It went much faster; the worn flannel of Charlie’s shirt put up less of a fight than Harvey’s crisply ironed cotton. Bared to the waist, he stood back and watched Harvey’s eyes roam over him. The hunger in them was mesmerizing— *he wants me, he really does.* It was tempting to fidget, being the subject of all that undivided attention, but he knew he didn’t have anything to hide; he was reasonably confident in his body these days, farm labor stripping away the last of his “cubicle body” and leaving him more muscular than he’d ever been. At last, Harvey met his eyes, dark and fathomless behind his glasses. He said nothing, just stepped into Charlie’s space and pressed kisses where his neck met his shoulder.

“What are you thinking about?” Charlie whispered, tilting his head back. He dipped his fingers just under the waistband of Harvey’s pants, smiling at the sharp intake of breath that followed. Harvey stayed silent for so long Charlie thought he wasn’t going to answer, but at last, he did.

“I’m thinking that I still can’t believe this is happening,” he breathed against Charlie’s skin, sending a shudder through him. “I can’t believe I get to touch you...kiss you.” He sighed, pressing his face into Charlie’s neck. “I’ve imagined it for so long.”

Privately, Charlie felt better that he wasn’t the only one who had been fantasizing for ages. He pulled their hips together, staying maddeningly close but not giving Harvey any friction, and whispered into his ear: “What did you imagine?”

“Oh,” Harvey breathed, trying to get closer, but Charlie tilted his hips away, smiling.

“Tell me, Harvey. What did you think about?” He moved his lips over Harvey’s ear, nose buried in his sweet-smelling hair. “I’ll make it worth your while. Only if you want to.” He actually *felt* Harvey’s face blush hotter against his skin, and he knew he was on to something.

“I, um.” Harvey seemed to be summoning his confidence; Charlie waited, kissing along his jaw and letting his hands roam. Harvey cleared his throat a little, trying again. “I imagined you, um...working out in the fields, planting something, getting kind of, ah...sweaty.” He stopped here, apparently mortified into silence.

“It’s good that you like that,” Charlie murmured gently against the underside of his jaw. “It happens a lot, believe me. Sometimes it gets so bad I have to take my shirt off.” Harvey let out a little moan, and Charlie fought hard to suppress his grin. “What happened next?”

“Well…” Charlie took pity on him, bringing his hips forward and into alignment with Harvey’s; the doctor gave a shuddery exhale, melting against him. “I would come by to say hello, and, and, I would see you and get, *oh…”*

“You’d get hard?” Charlie prompted, punctuating it with a little roll of his hips, and Harvey gave a frantic, uncoordinated nod. Charlie smiled and kissed him on the mouth, making it as

filthy and suggestive as he knew how. When he broke away, Harvey's breathing had gone a little erratic.

"You'd turn around and see me, and I wouldn't be able to hide it," he panted, gaining steam now. Lust seemed to be winning out over shyness, and Charlie was thrilled, hanging on his every word. "You'd ask me if I wanted to come in, and I would, and... *ah!*... and once we got inside you'd, um, kiss me…"

"I wouldn't be able to resist," Charlie agreed, moving his hands to the button of Harvey's pants; Harvey let out a moan so low Charlie felt it rather than heard it. "You standing there, looking at me like that…I'd *have* to kiss you." He slipped the button free, felt Harvey shiver. "What next?" Harvey didn't answer, the pink flush spreading down his chest, and Charlie thought they might have reached the crucial moment of the plot. "Did we move things to the bed?"

"Yes," Harvey answered quickly—too quickly. Charlie craned his neck to look him in the face, an eyebrow raised, and Harvey sighed in defeat. "No, we never made it to the bed," he admitted. Charlie was surprised, but he supposed it made sense. Harvey had said he'd thought about *kissing* him, after all, he hadn't explicitly said he had imagined what happened next. Maybe he wasn't the type of guy who fantasized about—

"Because you bent me over the kitchen table," Harvey finished, and Charlie's brain short-circuited in the wake of the lust that shot through him. Some of his shock must have shown on his face, because the corners of Harvey's mouth turned up in a small, self-satisfied smile, in spite of his red cheeks.

"Yoba," Charlie croaked. Harvey straightened, looking as prim as a person could while half-naked with unbuttoned pants.

"Yes, well," he said, sounding much more like his usual self, "you asked." The last thing Charlie wanted was for Harvey to retreat into self-consciousness; he stepped forward, sliding a hand along Harvey's jaw until he met his eyes.

"I did ask, and I'm so glad you told me," he said, pouring as much sincerity and warmth into his voice as he could. "That's the hottest thing I've ever heard, Harvey, honestly."

Harvey blinked, and smiled a little wider. "Really?"

"Are you kidding?" Charlie pulled him in by the belt loops, grinding against him so he could feel the evidence; Harvey's head fell back and he groaned. "I would *love* to do that to you, you have no idea." Harvey's breath caught, and Charlie mouthed up that long expanse of neck to his ear.

"But since this is our first time," he went on, softly, "what I really want, right now, is to get you into bed and take our time. I want to make you feel so good you forget your own name." He nipped at Harvey's earlobe, eliciting a gasp. "Does that sound all right?"

"Please," Harvey said, his eyes falling closed.

Charlie marveled, not for the first time, at his absurd luck. Somehow, he had the most beautiful man in town in his bed, naked and gasping beneath him. He ran his hands up Harvey's sides, cataloging the sensations, getting lost in the slow exploration. Something occurred to him, and he sat back for a moment.

"It's not romantic, but quick question," Charlie said, tentatively. Harvey met his eyes, then nodded, understanding.

"I was tested after my last time," he said. "I'm clean, but I know it's more responsible to...if you prefer to use—"

"I'm clean too," Charlie said quickly. "Tested right before I left Zuzu. It's up to you, though. Totally fine either way."

"No sense in overcomplicating things, then," Harvey said with a twitch of his mustache, and settled back against the pillows, silent permission for Charlie to get on with it.

As Charlie's fingers brushed over a nipple, he heard a long, soft exhalation; he stole a glance up at Harvey and saw that his eyes had fallen closed, long lashes resting on his cheekbones. Charlie smiled to himself, ducking to press a kiss to Harvey's hipbone, and felt a little thrill of pleasure when Harvey's long fingers threaded into his hair. He looked up again and met Harvey's eyes, open now and dark with want.

"You're so beautiful," Charlie whispered, settling between Harvey's open legs. Harvey flushed deep pink from his face to his chest, whether from the compliment or the position, Charlie wasn't sure. It was hard to mistake the intent; Harvey's long, slender cock jutted up inches from Charlie's face, and Charlie's mouth watered. He shifted forward, not touching yet, but ghosting breaths along its length.

"Oh *fuck,"* Harvey blurted, and Charlie almost laughed in delight. Harvey, *his* Harvey, reduced to swearing! He'd never imagined the shy doctor sounding like that, but now he was desperate to hear it again. In one fluid motion, he slid his mouth down over Harvey's cock. The effect was just as electric as he'd hoped: Harvey's other hand joined the first, fisting hard in his hair as his hips bucked, and he cried, "Oh, fuck, *Charlie!"*

Charlie couldn't have stopped now if the entire village had burst in on them. He pulled out all the stops, working up and down Harvey's length with the best moves he knew. On one particularly tricky maneuver, swirling his tongue over the head as he pulled off, Harvey's hips left the bed entirely to hover in midair. Charlie loved this, giving pleasure to someone else—and he loved it even more with Harvey, who had clearly been deprived of pleasure for far too long. He rolled his balls in one hand, drawing up tight, and realized that Harvey was close. Well, this was as good a way to finish as any; he'd swallow him down this time, blow his mind, and then next time he could—

"Charlie, wait, *wait,"* Harvey was stammering above him, tugging urgently at his hair. Charlie pulled off, propping up on his elbows, and met Harvey's eyes.

“It’s okay, you can come in my mouth,” he said encouragingly, and Harvey’s breath left him in a shaky laugh.

“You’ve no idea how incredible that sounds,” he said, “and I fully intend to take you up on it. But...not this time. This time, I want...well. You said—that thing I, ah…”

“Anything, Harvey,” Charlie promised, trying not to grin. The man’s cock had been down his throat five seconds ago, an endless litany of curses falling from his lips, and now he couldn’t put a single dirty sentence together. Charlie wondered if he would ever stop finding it adorable, and decided probably not. Harvey took a deep breath, apparently steeling himself.

“I want you inside me,” he said in a rush. Charlie hadn’t thought he had any more blood to spare, but evidently he’d been wrong; he went impossibly harder, his mouth falling open. “Please,” Harvey added, as though worried Charlie would think him rude.

Charlie swallowed hard. “Are you sure?” he asked, running his hands down Harvey’s thighs. Harvey nodded, holding his gaze.

“Never been more sure of anything,” he said steadily, and suddenly Charlie *had* to kiss him, couldn’t stop himself. He surged up over Harvey’s body, straddling his hips and cradling his face in his hands. As their mouths came together, Harvey let out a low moan, pulling Charlie’s hips down with both hands. They slid together for a long, blissful moment, until Harvey finally pulled away. “I’m too far along for that,” he groaned, with a self-deprecating smile. “Better do it now, or you won’t get your chance.”

Harvey’s glasses were askew on his nose, and Charlie reached out to remove them, but Harvey covered his hands with his own and smiled. “I want to see you,” he whispered. Charlie swallowed again—where had this lump in his throat come from?—and straightened them, dropping a kiss on Harvey’s forehead before he moved away.

Kneeling between Harvey’s splayed legs, one of them thrown over his shoulder, Charlie slicked his fingers and trailed them down his perineum. When he felt the tight furl of Harvey’s entrance beneath his fingers, Harvey gave a violent shudder. Charlie looked at him questioningly, and he huffed a laugh. “It’s just been a *long* time,” he repeated. Charlie pressed a kiss to his knee, resuming his stroking.

“I can’t believe that,” he said, circling his fingers. “Just look at you. How have men not been throwing themselves at you?”

“You’ll have to ask them,” Harvey retorted breathlessly, his back arching as the first finger breached him. Charlie felt as though he might faint, dizzy with lust at the feeling of Harvey’s body slick and hot around his finger. He stroked gently, letting Harvey get used to the intrusion.

“When you say a long time,” he asked conversationally, trying to distract them both from his body’s urgent need to *take him,* “how long is long? It’s been a while for me too,” he added, not wanting Harvey to feel scrutinized. It had been months, of course; he hadn’t had a partner since leaving Zuzu City. He gave a little twist of his finger, and Harvey gasped, grinding down against his hand.

“More,” Harvey demanded, “please, more.” Charlie obligingly added another finger, watching with delight as Harvey’s head thumped back against the pillow, and waited for him to answer. “My breakup was six years ago,” he panted, at last.

“Well, sure, but obviously there have been others...since…” Charlie trailed off and stopped moving, realization dawning; Harvey held his gaze, brows drawn together. “Jesus, Harvey, I’m such an asshole. Forgive me, I shouldn’t have pried.”

Harvey shook his head on the pillow, eyes falling closed again. “Don’t worry about it,” he insisted, giving Charlie a little nudge with his knee that clearly said *move.* “It doesn’t matter. You’re here, now.”

“I’m here,” Charlie agreed, his heart giving a little pang in his chest. He resumed the movements of his hand, still feeling foolish. “Everyone else is an idiot,” he added finally.

“You won’t get any argument from me— *there,”* he nearly shouted, as Charlie’s third finger entered him. “Oh, fuck, Charlie, I’m ready. I’m ready.”

“I don’t want to hurt you, let’s give it another—”

“Please,” Harvey begged, sounding so wanton and desperate that Charlie nearly came on the spot. Holding tight to Harvey’s leg, he pulled his fingers slowly out, almost giddy at the broken noise that escaped Harvey’s throat. As he took himself in hand and lined up against Harvey’s slick entrance, their eyes met, and a deep emotion passed between them. Harvey gave a tiny nod, permission, and then with one push Charlie slid inside him.

“Oh,” Harvey breathed, shivering from head to toe; Charlie had to wait a moment, kissing along the inside of Harvey’s knee, to be sure he wouldn’t embarrass himself by coming five seconds in. He was entirely focused on just the points of connection between them: his cock inside Harvey’s body, his lips against his skin, Harvey’s knee resting on his shoulder. After what felt like an eternity, Harvey nudged him again. Planting one hand on Harvey’s hip and the other around his raised thigh, he pulled out slowly, then pushed smoothly back in.

“Ohhh, *Charlie.”*

“God, Harvey, you’re incredible,” he said fervently, setting up a slow, rolling rhythm. It felt so good, so incredibly sweet and hot and tight, Charlie wasn’t sure he would survive it. *But what a way to go,* he thought, hitching Harvey’s hips tighter into his lap. Almost as good as the feeling were the sights and sounds: Harvey spread out beneath him, all that pale skin flushed pink with arousal, his lips parted and glasses askew again over closed eyes. With every thrust of Charlie’s cock, he let out a low keening sound, and Charlie found himself picking up the pace almost against his will. He just felt *so good;* Charlie didn’t have the willpower to hold back.

Charlie pulled Harvey’s leg a little higher, changing the angle, and on his next thrust Harvey’s eyes flew open. *“Charlie!”* he shouted, his entire body going tense, and Charlie gave a wicked grin.

“Found it, did I?” he asked breathlessly, careful to keep his thrusts at the same angle. Harvey looked wrecked, his head thrashing on the pillow and fingers gripping the sheets. “Harvey—*ah!*— can I, can I—”

“Do it, fuck me,” Harvey ground out, and Charlie took him at his word. He pounded into Harvey’s body, faster and faster, wringing those same gasps from Harvey on every stroke. Oh, it was heaven; nothing had ever felt this good, nothing, *nothing.*

“Ohhhh, baby, that’s it, so good—”

“Don’t stop, Charlie, *please!”*

“Never—oh, *fuck—”*

Charlie dimly heard alarm bells in the back of his mind—he was getting too close, he needed to take care of Harvey first, needed to make this good for him, he should slow down—but out of nowhere Harvey’s body seized, his hips flying up off the bed and mouth opening in a perfect O, and Charlie watched in absolute awe as he came, his cock completely untouched. He’d never seen anything so incredible in his life, Harvey splashing his own chest and neck with his release, head thrown back and insides clenching around Charlie’s cock. Charlie slowed, not wanting to overstimulate him, running a reverent hand up and down his abdomen. At long last, Harvey slumped back against the bed, panting; his beautiful green eyes found Charlie’s, full of feeling.

“That was amazing,” Charlie breathed, mesmerized. “Incredible.”

“That’s my line, I think,” Harvey panted, one corner of his mouth lifting in a breathless smile. “Your turn.”

“I can wait, if you need—”

“I need you to come in me,” Harvey interrupted firmly, and the words shot straight to Charlie’s cock. He adjusted his grip on Harvey’s leg and slammed into him again, nearly as close as he’d been before Harvey’s orgasm. Just a few more thrusts and he’d be *right there,* he was about to fall over the edge. Harvey’s long fingers wrapped around Charlie’s wrist and he was urging him, “Come for me, Charlie, come on, I need it—”

Charlie’s orgasm surged through him, the force of it nearly knocking him over. He bent over Harvey, pushing his leg nearly back into his chest, and shouted his name as the release flooded out of him. He felt the warm rush filling Harvey’s body, heard himself crying out as though his voice were very far away, and thrust shallowly until the last drop had left him.

They stayed like that for a long, still moment, only their heavy breaths breaking the silence of the farmhouse. As Charlie’s brain came back online, he realized he must be hurting Harvey’s leg; he pushed himself back to kneeling, pulled out as slowly and gently as he could manage, and eased Harvey’s thigh back down to the mattress. When their eyes met again, Harvey was gazing at him with the sweetest smile Charlie had ever seen on his face; the naked adoration pouring out of him squeezed at Charlie’s heart. Charlie leaned forward, arms on either side of Harvey’s chest, and kissed him.

“I’ll be right back,” he whispered against Harvey’s lips, and padded away to find a cloth.

When they had cleaned up, Charlie settled back against the headboard, fully planning to pull Harvey against his chest and hold him. In practice, though, the height difference proved a bit of an obstacle, and Charlie wound up with his face pressed into Harvey’s shoulder. With a long-suffering sigh, he allowed Harvey to trade him places.

“I wanted to cuddle *you,* after all that,” Charlie complained, and Harvey’s arms wrapped comfortably around his chest, squeezing a little.

“I don’t care who’s holding who,” Harvey murmured, nosing into Charlie’s hair and dropping little kisses that sent shivers up Charlie’s spine. “I’m just happy to be here with you.”

“You’ve got a point,” Charlie sighed, his eyes drifting closed as his hands came up to cover Harvey’s. The room was almost dark, only a faint wash of purplish light coming in through the window. It painted the lines of Harvey’s long legs, giving his pale skin an otherworldly glow. Charlie knew he would have to get up soon. The chicken coop needed to be closed, Bones needed to be let in, he needed to gather eggs and get them in the shipping box before nightfall. But for the moment, he wanted nothing more than to lie in Harvey’s arms, and so he let himself stay. They’d taken a long time to get here, after all.

A comfortable silence fell over them both, listening to the noises of evening on the farm: the animals settling in for the night, frogs calling from the pond, a light breeze blowing through the fields. Charlie ran his fingers absently through the fine hairs on Harvey’s arm, while Harvey continued his leisurely exploration of Charlie’s neck. They were quiet so long Charlie began to feel sleepy, and then Harvey spoke, soft against his ear.

“I keep thinking I’m going to wake up,” he confided. “That this is all a dream.”

Charlie smiled, eyes closed. “I know what you mean.”

Harvey drew a breath, started to speak, and then stopped. Charlie waited, fully awake now, knowing something significant was coming. “I wouldn’t let myself—hope for this,” he said finally, his finger tracing little circles on Charlie’s abdomen. “That you could want me, the way I wanted you.”

Charlie intertwined their fingers, holding both of Harvey’s hands tight. “I’ve wanted you for ages,” he said, hoping Harvey would hear the sincerity in his voice. “Practically since the day we met. I don’t think I realized it then, but it was there.”

“When did you realize?”

“The Flower Dance,” Charlie confessed, and Harvey gave a little questioning hum. “Watching you dance with Maru, it made me mad, even though I knew you weren’t really interested in her. *I* wanted to be the one you were dancing with.”

Harvey was silent for a moment, but Charlie knew he was awake. “I wanted that, too,” Harvey said quietly.

“I couldn’t stop thinking about you afterward. How sweet and smart and funny you are. How good you looked in that suit at the dance, how much better you’d look out of it.”

“Oh come on,” Harvey scoffed. “There were half a dozen young, available, attractive men wearing the same suit that day.”

“That’s right.” He craned his neck around, smiling when their eyes met. “But there was only one young, available, attractive man who caught my eye.” Harvey seemed at a loss for words, and Charlie turned over in his arms, their faces inches apart.

“Harvey,” he breathed, loving the shiver that ran through Harvey at the sound of his name, “you are beautiful to me. Every inch of you. Even the ones that stick up over my head, you damn giraffe.” That got a laugh out of him, a brief one, but it left a twinkling warmth in his eyes. “I wouldn’t change one thing about you, darlin’. I just wish I could make you see yourself the way I do.”

Harvey blinked at him, and the lurking doubt in his eyes tugged at Charlie’s heart. “You really mean that, don’t you?” he asked, stroking a hand up Charlie’s spine. “You don’t mind that I’m...you know. Older. Kind of gangly. Among other things.”

“You don’t mind that I’m young and short, do you?”

Harvey’s eyes darted to the side, a little shiftily. “It probably wouldn’t be good for me to admit that I find your height adorable, would it,” he asked, and Charlie rolled his eyes good-naturedly, propping his chin on Harvey’s chest.

“Well, it’s better than you finding it repellent,” he sighed, and their bodies shook with laughter. When they sobered, Harvey tilted Charlie’s chin up, kissing him for a long moment. It was so difficult to stop; Charlie wanted to lie in bed with him all day.

“Nothing about you is repellent,” Harvey assured him softly, smiling. “Are you joking? The first time I saw you, I nearly forgot to breathe.”

“That’s what was up with you! I thought maybe you were mad that I was taking up Maru’s time with chitchat. It seemed like you wanted me to leave.”

“Oh, Yoba, quite the opposite. I was just trying to order my thoughts before I spoke to you. I thought you might run for the hills if my first words to you were ‘please come upstairs with me and take your pants off.’”

“Well, you *are* my doctor. I probably would have done it,” Charlie quipped, and they both dissolved into laughter again.

A sad little howl from outside the front door brought Charlie, reluctantly, back to the real world. He sighed, giving Harvey one last kiss before he pushed himself up and out of bed. “Farm life doesn’t really take breaks, I’m afraid,” he said apologetically, rummaging around in the tangle of clothes for his pants. “I’ve got to get the animals settled in for the night.”

“Oh, of course,” Harvey said quickly, and started to stand. “I’ll get out of your hair, then.”

“No,” Charlie blurted, and Harvey froze in the act of reaching for his underwear. “I mean. Of course you can go home if you want. But...you could stay.” He grinned, embarrassed of how badly he was mucking this up. “I won’t be too long, maybe twenty minutes? Then we could eat something, and maybe...go back to bed?”

Harvey blinked at him, then smiled, with such transparent happiness Charlie nearly dove back into bed right then and there. “Okay,” he said, a little shyly. “Can I help with anything?”

“You just stay in bed and think about what you want.”

“For dinner?”

“That, too.”

Chapter End Notes

Whew! This was a long one, I hope you enjoyed it! When I started writing this fic, I wanted to prove that Harvey could be sexy. (I think he doesn't get a ton of attention compared to the other bachelors because he's older, shy, and has a mustache.) Charlie definitely finds him that way, and I hope you do too :)

Tomorrow: the Fair is in town, and so is a surprise visitor.

Chapter 11: Fall, Year 1

Chapter Summary

The Fair arrives, and so does an unexpected guest.

Chapter Notes

Only slight NSFW content this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harvey lay awake most of that first night in Charlie's bed, though his exhaustion after their second round did its best to pull him under. Charlie had fallen asleep almost instantly, his arms flung over his head, one of his ankles intertwined with Harvey's. Even Bones had been snoring gently from his bed in the corner for hours, but Harvey didn't want to close his eyes. He was afraid that if he let himself doze off, he would wake to find it had all been a dream.

He shifted closer to Charlie, tentatively reaching over to drape an arm over his chest. Charlie stirred a little but didn't wake; in his sleep, he wrapped an arm around Harvey's shoulders and pulled him close. Harvey lay stiffly for a moment, afraid to move too much and wake him, before giving in and resting his head on Charlie's shoulder. It felt just as blissful as he'd imagined it would.

He spent what felt like hours watching the progression of the moonlight over Charlie's peaceful face, but eventually, sleep managed to pull him under. When he woke in the morning, it was to a rooster crowing and a gentle, stroking pressure along his jaw. He opened his eyes to see Charlie, inches away and smiling sleepily at him, trailing fingers over his face in the golden dawn light. Harvey's entire body seemed to fill up with joy; it hadn't been a dream, it was real, Charlie was still here and still, apparently, glad to see him.

"Hi," Charlie whispered, tracing his fingers over Harvey's lower lip, and in lieu of a response, Harvey kissed him again. And again.

Harvey would never have guessed it, but it turned out that dating Charlie was *easy.* Their schedules were similarly busy during the day, so they quickly fell into a routine: Charlie came into town in the afternoon to run his errands, arriving at the clinic right before it closed. He and Maru caught up for a little while as Harvey finished up with his appointments, and when Maru went home, the two of them started their evening together. Sometimes they went

to the Stardrop, sometimes Harvey walked Charlie home and stayed the night at the farm, and sometimes they were so insatiable they just stumbled upstairs and went at it on Harvey's couch (which was, shamefully, larger than his bed). Harvey preferred the farm, both for the larger bed and because Charlie could never leave the animals to stay over at the clinic. They had sex almost every night, sometimes more than once; it was as though they were trying to make up for Harvey's six years of celibacy in a single season. (Harvey was certainly willing to try.)

One day, inevitably, there was an outbreak of colds that filled his appointment schedule to overflowing. Harvey warned Charlie the night before that he would be working through dinner and too tired to fool around after work, intending to save him the trip into town. Instead, Charlie arrived at the clinic at 5 PM, delivered dinner for Harvey and Maru, dropped a kiss into Harvey's hair, and went home without any attempt to pressure him into leaving or guilt him into eating together. As Harvey tucked into his farm-fresh Super Meal later that evening, it occurred to him that maybe this was how some relationships worked—both participants understanding the other's schedule and needs, nobody getting angry if someone was unavailable for an evening. That wasn't a dynamic he had experienced before, and for the thousandth time, he wished he hadn't wasted so many years of his life on Philip.

The weeks passed in a kind of blissful blur, and soon the Stardew Valley Fair approached. Harvey knew about the grange competition, where the producers in town displayed their best items and were judged on their quality, but he hadn't really expected Charlie to compete. He was still very new at farming, after all. But as it turned out, Charlie had a competitive streak Harvey hadn't anticipated.

"Hell yes, I'm competing," he insisted, as he bustled around his kitchen making dinner; Harvey sat at the table with a glass of wine, admiring the view. "My stuff is *good.* And I've been cooking a lot, and saving some cool things from the mines."

Harvey decided to pretend he hadn't said that last bit. "Well, if it's not too much trouble, could you go ahead and beat Pierre? He wins every year, and honestly, it's going to his head. I'm tired of listening to him crow about it."

"Will do, Number One." That seemed to have developed into a geeky sort of pet name, and as it always did, it sent a little shiver of glee down Harvey's spine. He'd found a man who was excellent in the kitchen, even better in bed, *and* got his endearments from Star Trek; how had this become his life? Charlie delivered a plate of steaming fish to the table in front of him, and Harvey inhaled appreciatively. He didn't know what kind of fish it was, but it was covered in herbs and butter, so did it really matter?

"Did you catch this one?"

"Yeah." Charlie slid into his own seat across the table and shook a napkin into his lap. "Been working on my fishing now that the crops are in. *Which,"* he added, with a dramatic flourish of his fork, "is just another reason I'm going to wipe the floor with Pierre's smug ass next week."

"I can't wait."

The first time Charlie said it, Harvey wondered who he was talking to.

“V, could you hand me those artichokes?”

He stood over a cutting board, putting together their dinner while Harvey poured them each a glass of wine. Though he hadn’t looked up, his hand was extended toward Harvey, clearly expectant. Harvey blinked at him, uncomprehending. “Who’s V?”

“Oh.” Charlie looked around at him, bemusement on his own face. “Huh. That just kind of came out. V, as in like...Har- *vey?”* He shrugged, looking sheepish. “Your name is kind of hard to shorten. I didn’t think you’d like ‘Harv.’”

“Yoba, please, no.” Harvey shuddered involuntarily. “Philip used to call me that. I always hated it.”

“I can just stick to your full name, if you want.”

“No, no, it’s fine.” He turned it over in his mind for a moment, handing Charlie the requested artichokes. “I like it, actually.”

Charlie smiled at him. “Yeah?”

“Nobody’s ever called me that before.” *It makes me feel like I'm yours,* he thought, but did not add. Charlie went back to his chopping, still smiling.

“What did they call you at boarding school? ‘Master Harvey’?”

“I went to boarding school, not *Hogwarts.”*

“They didn’t call people ‘master’ at—”

“I know, Char. I know.”

He almost let himself slip, once. They moved slowly together in the farmhouse bed, Charlie’s hand wrapped tight around both of their cocks, Harvey’s arms around his neck. The pleasure built and built within him, and when it finally spilled over, Harvey cried, “Oh, Charlie—I—” He had only just managed to catch himself in time. Experience had taught him that it was best to keep these sentiments to himself for a while, even if he loved Charlie more every day, even if he was dying to tell him so. Charlie couldn’t possibly *need* Harvey the way Harvey needed him; he probably didn’t feel anything real for Harvey yet, if he ever would. And that was *fine.* There was no sense putting himself out there and making things awkward.

Instead, he channeled it into more specific statements, ones that didn’t necessarily mean *I love you* outright. “I love your hands,” he murmured to Charlie later that night, holding one up and running reverent fingers over it in the moonlight. Charlie laughed softly, shaking his head on the pillow.

“You’ve got to be joking,” he said. “Yours are so graceful and smooth, you’re like a hand model. Mine are always rough and covered in blisters. And God knows what else.”

“There’s nothing wrong with that. You work hard.” He pulled the hand in question to his mouth, pressing a kiss into the palm. “I like it. They’re capable, they’re...strong.”

Charlie quirked an eyebrow at this. “Strong, huh? You like that?”

Harvey’s cheeks burned, but he couldn’t fight back his grin. “I do.”

“You like my strong hands...here?”

“Ah...yes.”

“How about here?”

“Oh, *yes.* ”

The day of the Fair dawned clear and crisp, perfect weather for a festival. Harvey had stayed in his own apartment that night, as Charlie had had a to-do list a mile long before the grange display. While the prospect of spending the day surrounded by villagers—and *tourists,* Yoba help him—was still daunting, he had to admit he was looking forward to cheering Charlie on in the competition. Whether or not Charlie won, it would be nice to show him off in public, to stand with him and radiate an aura of *look at my boyfriend, I’m so proud of him.*

He knew everyone in town knew about them. It would have been an impossible secret to keep even if they’d wanted to, especially with Marnie running around telling everyone. Several of the villagers had tried to talk to him about it, with varying degrees of winking camaraderie, but he’d mostly kept his mouth shut. It wasn't that he didn’t want people to know; quite the opposite, he felt an absurd smugness that Charlie had chosen him. Charlie, who was beautiful and popular and who half the town seemed to have set their sights on within moments of his arrival, spent his nights with *Harvey.* It was enough to go to a man’s head. But it still felt so surreal, Harvey couldn’t shake the worry that it would all crumble if he let himself relax too much. And so he met their questions and remarks with bland smiles, pleading the fifth on anything relationship-related.

There was one exception, of course. He’d walked into the clinic the morning after his first time in Charlie’s bed to find Maru already installed at her desk, practically beside herself with glee at witnessing his walk of shame (though in truth, he’d rarely been less ashamed of anything). She’d pressed him for the details of their balloon date, and though Harvey had initially resisted, he ended up telling her everything (that was safe for work, anyway). It felt *good,* to relive one of the happiest days of his life with a friend. He’d never really done that before; he hadn’t realized it was something he’d been missing out on. Charlie had mentioned to Harvey that he shared most of the details of their relationship with Shane, which still caused a minor stab of jealousy, but nothing like the bone-deep despair he’d felt before. It was only fair that Charlie should have friends outside their relationship, after all.

Harvey spent some time that morning getting all of his first aid supplies in order and easily at hand. The Fair took place right outside his front door, so there was no need for a medical tent, but he liked to know that everything was ready in the exam room just in case. In previous years, he'd treated minor injuries ranging from fish-hooks stuck in fingers, to welts from slingshot pellets, to the various bumps and bruises of the publicly intoxicated. Most of the time, he was secretly glad to have an excuse to retreat inside the clinic, but this year he found himself hoping his services wouldn't be needed. He had, optimistically, given Maru the day off.

Around 9:30, the bell over the door tinkled, and he poked his head out of the back. Charlie was standing inside the front door, bouncing on the balls of his feet. He grinned at Harvey, and the nervous energy radiated off him in waves. Harvey hadn't realized winning this competition meant so much to him.

"All set up," he announced, jerking a thumb toward the door. "Want to come see?"

"Of course," Harvey said, crossing the waiting room. When he made it to the door, Charlie reached up and threaded fingers into his hair, smiling a little more calmly.

"Missed you last night," he said softly, and went up on tiptoe to kiss Harvey. The words were almost as potent as the kiss; Harvey had come to hate sleeping alone, and he'd missed Charlie fiercely, but had thought it was probably a bit needy of him to say so. Apparently, though, it was all right.

"Same here. Did you finish everything you needed to?"

"I did. Take a look."

All the grange displays were set up in front of Pierre and Harvey's building: Pierre's own display, stuffed to the gills with produce; Marnie's, filled with animal products; Willy's pungent collection of fish; and in the middle of all of them, a box Harvey knew was Charlie's. Who else could squeeze so much variety into one display? A jar of pickles nestled between a picture-perfect pumpkin and a fat salmon; an enormous chanterelle mushroom leaned against a bouquet of fairy roses, and beside the eggs...was that…?

"Charlie, is that a *diamond?"* he asked incredulously, straightening his glasses as he leaned closer. Charlie's chest puffed up a little in obvious pride.

"It is. I've found a couple of them in the mines, actually. That one's the biggest."

"Yoba." Harvey knew he'd been going back to the mines, a thought that filled him with panic if he let himself think about it too much, but he hadn't realized Charlie has bringing home anything besides ores and the occasional chunk of quartz. He hoped the diamonds didn't indicate he'd progressed further down into the tunnels. But that was a discussion for another day. "Well…" He dropped his voice, moving closer so Pierre and Marnie wouldn't hear. "You're obviously going to win," he murmured into Charlie's ear, and Charlie grinned, shaking his head.

"I don't know. The others are good too."

“They’re good. They’re not *Charlie* good, though.” Charlie glanced up at him through his lashes, the same look he’d given him in the Stardrop all those months ago, and Harvey’s stomach did a little flip. How was he still so affected by just a *look?*

“If it weren’t almost time,” Charlie said in an undertone, “I’d drag you off behind those hay bales and show you *‘Charlie good.’”*

Harvey’s breath hitched. “I mean, Lewis hasn’t announced anything yet, we could—”

“All right, ladies and gentlemen!” Lewis bellowed, right on cue, and Harvey groaned. Charlie laughed, squeezing his hand; Harvey squeezed back reassuringly, then ducked down to peck him on the cheek.

“Good luck,” he whispered, and reluctantly stepped back to join the crowd. He stood in the empty spot between Maru and Shane, eyes still fixed on Charlie. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Maru grin up at him, twisting her hands.

“This is nerve-wracking!” she said, watching Lewis start his judging rounds. Privately, Harvey agreed. He hadn’t felt nervous before, but seeing Charlie standing up there by himself, he was suddenly seized by a fierce hope that Charlie would win. Not just to shove it in Pierre’s face, but because he deserved it; he’d worked harder than any of them, had reinvented his entire life in the space of just under seven months, and Harvey wanted that to be validated. He wanted everyone in town to congratulate Charlie, to shower him in appreciation and admiration. He wanted Charlie to be happy, to be proud of himself.

The judging took what felt like hours, but couldn’t really have been more than fifteen or twenty minutes. The crowd had begun to mill around again, chattering and laughing with each other, but Harvey couldn’t focus on anyone long enough to maintain a conversation. He did try greeting Shane, but only received a grunt in return; looking more closely, he saw the tell-tale signs of a hangover. It worried him a little, Shane’s drinking, which seemed to be a nightly indulgence these days. If he could just get the man to come in for an appointment, he could talk to him about it; maybe he could get Charlie to pressure him a little.

“I’ve got the scores tabulated!” Lewis called over the din of the crowd, earning a snort from Shane. One could hardly call it *tabulating* when they were the only judge, but then Lewis had always been a bit self-important. The hubbub died down, and Harvey’s eyes found Charlie again; he looked agonized with nerves, his hands jammed deep into the pockets of his jeans. Harvey gave him what he hoped was a reassuring smile, but the one Charlie returned looked more like a grimace.

“This year’s displays were the best yet, I think we can all agree,” Lewis began, and Harvey groaned internally. *Just get to the point!* “This Valley was built by hard-working, resourceful people like these four, and at this festival we honor their efforts to improve life in Pelican Town every day. Any one of them deserves a prize, but only one can take home *this* particular trophy.”

Harvey noticed that Pierre looked utterly unconcerned, even bored, and felt the hope rise up in him again. *Come on, Charlie. Take that arrogant jerk down a peg.* Marnie and Willy didn’t look particularly concerned either, but Harvey knew it was because they no longer expected

to win; Pierre beat them every year. Lewis cleared his throat, holding out a thick piece of paper as though he'd needed to write down *one of four names,* and said in his most pompous voice:

"The winner of this year's grange competition, with 104 points, is...Charlie!"

The gathered crowd went wild; nobody had ever seen Pierre lose before, and Harvey almost felt sympathy for the grocer, he looked so crushed. But in the next moment his eyes landed on Charlie, and any thoughts of Pierre were swept away in the wave of happiness he felt. Charlie looked dizzy with relief, grinning from ear to ear as he accepted Marnie's enthusiastic hug. Willy shook his hand, pumping it behind Marnie's back, and Lewis approached with the prize ribbon. Maru had slipped her arm through Harvey's and was cheering at the top of her lungs, shaking him back and forth; even Shane smiled, clapping and raising his beer (Yoba, was he already drinking? It was ten in the morning). Giving Maru a quick squeeze, he extracted himself from her embrace, fighting his way through the crowd toward his victorious boyfriend. Charlie's eyes met his through the crowd, his jubilant smile drawing Harvey like a magnet.

Just as he neared him, though, Lewis gestured to Charlie and held up a camera. Harvey hung back, staying out of frame to let Charlie have his moment—but at the last moment before Lewis pressed the button, Charlie's arm shot out, seizing Harvey around the wrist. He tugged him into frame before Harvey could regain his balance, threw both arms around him, and planted a smacking kiss on his cheek. Harvey heard a few titters from the crowd as the shutter clicked, and he was sure his face was bright red, but he found he couldn't be bothered to care what anyone thought. Charlie wanted him to share in his moment, had kissed him in front of the entire Valley, and he would be damned if he was going to waste the moment worrying about the opinions of tourists.

"I think that's our most unconventional winner photo yet," Lewis was saying, but there was a smile on his face. "Congratulations, Charlie. Your grandfather would be proud."

"Thanks, Lewis."

Lewis moved on to offer compliments to the runners-up, and Charlie loosened his hold on Harvey but didn't let go. Harvey slung an arm around his shoulders, reveling in the feeling of being out in public with Charlie. For once, he felt fond of everyone at the Fair, the crowds seeming cheerful and festive rather than grating. He pressed a kiss into Charlie's hair.

"I told you," he murmured, and Charlie laughed.

"You did. I tried not to get my hopes up, though."

"Well," said Pierre, approaching the two of them through the crowd, "I'll be honest, I didn't think a first-year farmer could beat me." Harvey was fully prepared to get indignant on Charlie's behalf, but Pierre unexpectedly put out his hand. "Congratulations, Charlie."

Charlie shook the offered hand, smiling. "Thank you, Pierre. No hard feelings?"

“Oh, of course not. You’ve given me the first real challenge I’ve had in a decade.” He smirked, a twinkle in his eye. “I let my guard down. Next year I won’t make it so easy.”

“I always appreciate a worthy adversary,” Charlie said with mock-seriousness, and Pierre gave a little bow of his head.

“Enjoy your day, gentlemen.”

“You, too.”

“So,” Harvey asked, looking down at Charlie’s smiling face, “now that you’ve got the big stuff out of the way, what do you want to do next?”

“I’ve never been to this festival. Show the new guy around, would you?”

Somehow, the Fair was actually *fun* when Harvey showed it off to Charlie. They played a handful of carnival games: the strength contest, the fishing game, the slingshot game. Harvey got the high score on the latter, surprising them both. Charlie visited the fortune teller, and though he wouldn’t tell Harvey what he’d been told, he came out with a pink-cheeked smile and gave Harvey a lingering kiss. They ate Gus’s burgers and cooed over Marnie and Shane’s animals, made small talk with some neighbors, drank a few beers. Harvey felt loose and relaxed, the most comfortable he’d ever been at a festival. In fact, besides the balloon date, he couldn’t remember the last time he’d had such a good day.

It was this last thought that still lingered in his mind as they headed hand-in-hand for the prize stand, Charlie eager to pick up a limited-edition rarecrow for his pumpkin patch. Harvey was so thoroughly contented, he almost didn’t recognize the familiar voice that cut across the hubbub.

“Well, well. Fancy seeing *you* here.”

The blood froze in Harvey’s veins, his entire body going stiff; Charlie looked up from his transaction, startled at the sudden clench of Harvey’s fingers. “Darlin’? You okay?”

Harvey strongly considered just staying rooted and silent, refusing to move until the situation resolved itself, but unfortunately things didn’t work like that. He turned, slowly, wondering if there really was a Yoba and, if so, why They were such a vindictive asshole. The face of the speaker came into view—a face he knew well, one he’d done his best to forget.

“Hello, Philip.”

Chapter End Notes

Oh no! Sorry, but I can never leave well enough alone for long ;) Hope you're enjoying, shitty ex-boyfriends aside!

Tomorrow: Charlie meets Philip, says something surprising, and gets himself into a spot of trouble. The villagers of Pelican Town come to the rescue.

Chapter 12: Fall, Year 1

Chapter Summary

Charlie does something rash, and faces the consequences. Fortunately, the villagers of Pelican Town take care of their own.

Chapter Notes

To probably nobody's surprise, things are getting NSFW again this chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Charlie had never seen that look on Harvey's face before, as though he'd seen a ghost, and he was instantly on guard. What was wrong with him? Everything had been fine a second ago; was he having a stroke? Just when he opened his mouth to ask again, Harvey turned and spoke to someone who'd come up behind them, and suddenly everything made a horrible kind of sense.

It was funny: Charlie had fashioned Philip into kind of a supervillain in his mind, since he'd treated Harvey so poorly, but this guy was just a *guy.* He was willowy, taller than Charlie but not as tall as Harvey, and he had blonde hair in a kind of careless style that Charlie suspected actually took a lot of time to maintain. He was okay-looking, Charlie supposed. Actually, he revised, he was *good-* looking, almost exactly Charlie's usual type, but the loathing clouded Charlie's judgment a little. Philip had a pair of sunglasses dangling from the open collar of his shirt, and Charlie arbitrarily decided to hate this detail.

"Harvey," Philip said, smiling as though they were old friends. "It's been, what, four years?"

"Six," Harvey corrected him, his voice sounding horribly stiff. Charlie squeezed his hand in solidarity. He had no idea what to do here; should he interrupt? Should he keep his mouth shut?

"I always wondered where you ran off to. Do you *live* here?"

"I do. Not that it's any of your concern." Harvey looked away and swallowed, then fixed his gaze on the ground near Philip's stupid spotless sneakers. He looked trapped and miserable, and Charlie hated it. "What are you doing here?"

"Some friends of mine were just dying to come check out this *adorable* little village on the coast, so I let them drag me along. Never thought I'd find you *here,* of all places." He smiled

at Harvey, and Charlie wanted to knock it off his face. “You haven’t changed a bit.”

“You don’t know whether I’ve changed or not.”

Philip held up his hands as though dealing with a dangerous animal. “Hey, hey, I’m just making conversation! Thought it could be fun to catch up.”

“I don’t think we have anything to catch up on.”

Philip’s attention shifted from Harvey to Charlie, and his eyes traveled up and down Charlie’s body in a way that made the farmer’s hackles rise. “Oh, I don’t know,” Philip drawled. “It looks like you’ve been pretty busy to me.”

Harvey said nothing, a sure sign he was flustered, and Charlie decided it was time to intervene. “I don’t think we’ve met,” he said, keeping his tone icily polite and not letting go of Harvey’s hand. “I’m Charlie.”

“My boyfriend,” Harvey added, his tongue finally coming unglued, and Charlie gave him a quick smile that he hoped was reassuring. Philip smirked.

“Are you, now? And what do you do, Charlie?”

Something told Charlie the question was a trap, but fuck it, he wasn't afraid of this guy. “I’m a farmer,” he said, raising his chin a little.

Predictably, Philip laughed, throwing his head back as though Charlie had said something ludicrous. “Moving up in the world, eh, Harvey?” he managed, and Harvey suddenly drew himself up to his full height. There was a look on his face that couldn’t portend anything good.

“Philip, you—”

“Ignore him, darlin’,” Charlie urged, tugging on his hand. “Don’t let him ruin our day. Come on.”

With a long glare at Philip, Harvey finally acquiesced, and let Charlie lead him away by the hand. Charlie already knew it was no good; they were never going to be able to reclaim the easy happiness they’d felt earlier in the day. He wished fervently that Philip had never shown up here. Pelican Town had been Harvey’s escape from his past, and it felt like a violation for the man himself to show up in their peaceful little bubble.

“I’m sorry,” Harvey said at last, as they retreated back into the crowds, “for not introducing you. Back there.”

“Oh, don’t worry about that.”

Harvey seemed to be struggling to organize his thoughts. “I didn’t—I’m not—”

Charlie took one look at his face and realized he was drowning in anxiety. He abruptly changed course, pulling them into the abandoned space behind the fortune-teller’s tent.

Wrapping a hand around the back of Harvey's neck, he tugged his head down and leaned their foreheads together; Harvey's eyes slid shut.

"Sweetheart, it's okay. Really," Charlie assured him in a low, soothing voice. A pained line appeared between Harvey's eyebrows, and he met Charlie's gaze again.

"I wasn't trying to hide you," he said, a little more composed. "I'm proud to be with you."

"I know that. You know I feel the same way, right?"

Harvey's eyes shifted to the side, and he dodged the question—a battle for another day, Charlie thought. "I'm proud of your work, too. It's important. He...that…"

"He's a dick," Charlie said simply, startling a little huff of laughter out of Harvey. "But it takes more to offend me than a snotty shithead looking down his nose at me." He pressed a kiss to Harvey's cheekbone, lingering for a moment. "You are not responsible for anything he says, and there's nothing he can do to change my mind about you." Harvey said nothing, still looking disconcerted, so Charlie kept going. "It's pathetic, isn't it? He's so insecure he has to insult your new boyfriend to make himself feel better."

"He knows you're much better-looking than him," Harvey ventured, and Charlie laughed.

"That must be it." Charlie's grip slid down Harvey's arms, catching both of his hands; he squeezed them a little, smiling at Harvey. "You okay?"

"Yes. I'm sorry if I worried you." Harvey stepped forward and kissed Charlie, soft and sweet. Charlie still hadn't gotten used to it, weeks into the relationship; it was so different, kissing someone he really cared about. The usual intoxication of a new partner was there, but with another layer beneath, something vast and warm he'd never felt before. He was half tempted to suggest they blow off the rest of the fair and head home to bed, but he had to tear down his grange display, and anyway he didn't want to let Philip run them off. This was *their* home, their territory.

They emerged from the shadows behind the tent into the crowd, and Charlie looked around at the games nearby, shielding his eyes with his hand. "Anything you still want to do, V? We could try the Wheel of Chance, although it's probably just throwing money away—"

"Doctor Harvey!" called Gus's booming voice, and they turned to see the bartender hurrying toward them through the crowds. "We need you at the clinic. Can you come?"

"Of course," Harvey said briskly, and Charlie fought down his amusement at how quickly Harvey had gone into Doctor Mode. "Is it serious?"

Gus rolled his eyes, mustache twitching. "No, not at all. Couple of tourist kids antagonizing one of Marnie's goats, they got butted and skinned some knees. Nothing major, but the parents are being dramatic. It shouldn't take long."

"Right behind you." Harvey gave Charlie an apologetic look, dropping the hand he was holding. "I'm sorry, honey. I'll try to hurry back."

“No worries at all. I need to clean out my grange box anyway, I’ll go do that now.”

They went their separate ways, and Charlie began carefully packing his wares into the crate he’d brought them in. The others had all finished already; the fair seemed to be winding down. He suddenly felt exhausted. A sleepless night of preparations and a hectic day of socializing were catching up to him.

“Don’t pass out down there,” came Shane’s voice from overhead. “Take it from me, those cobblestones aren’t comfortable.”

“I don’t think I want to know why you know that,” Charlie said, standing up and stretching. “Make yourself useful, would you?”

As they wrapped his items for transport, Charlie filled Shane in on the tense encounter with Philip. He’d been looking forward to this, because Shane’s baseline for most people was open dislike; give him an actual reason to hate someone, and he could really get going. Charlie felt that always having exactly the reaction he was looking for was an underrated trait in friends.

“What a prick,” Shane grumbled, nestling a bottle of cream into the crate of hay.

“You said it.”

“Maybe he thinks he’ll get back into Harvey’s pants if he makes you look bad.”

A burst of anger surged through Charlie’s veins at just the thought. “He should’ve spent a little more time in Harvey’s pants and a little less time in everyone else’s.”

“What’s this guy look like again?”

“Blonde, stupid hair, like five-ten, skinny, white shirt, dumb sunglasses.”

“Speak of the devil,” Shane said, nodding to something behind Charlie, and he turned. There Philip was, walking across the square as though he owned the place. Charlie stood, brushing off his hands and folding his arms across his chest. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Shane do the same. It was obvious he was heading for the clinic; Charlie was going to keep him out of there if he had to drag him to the train station himself. At the last moment, though, Philip changed course and headed toward Charlie.

“Ah, there you are,” he called as he approached, and Charlie felt his anger rise again. *Stupid fucking voice, too,* he thought. What he said was, “What do you want?”

“I think we got off on the wrong foot before,” he replied, drawing to a stop just in front of Charlie. “I was just so surprised to see Harvey, and to see him with *you.”*

“Yes, well, it’s been a surprising day. Must be about time for you to head home, huh?”

“Just about. My friends already headed to the station.” Philip smiled at him suddenly, tilting his head slightly to one side. “You know, now that I’ve had a chance to look at you, I can see why he likes you. You’re kind of cute.” Before Charlie could think up a suitably obscene

response to this, Philip fished something from his pocket and held it out. “When you get tired of him, give me a call. You and I could have some fun together.”

Charlie took the business card from his outstretched hand, looking down at it. A deadly calm had come over him, narrowing his focus down to just the two of them; he barely even noticed the dwindling crowds chattering away around them. “Let me make sure I have this straight,” he began, meeting Philip’s eye; the asshole smirked at him, arrogant as ever. “You, Harvey’s ex-boyfriend, are asking me, his *current* boyfriend, to meet up with you so I can...what, cheat on him?”

“Phrase it however you want,” Philip said, rolling his eyes in exasperation. “What he doesn’t know won’t hurt him. Believe me, I should know.”

“Huh,” Charlie said, as though Philip had said something mildly interesting. He smirked back, and then without really knowing he was going to do it, he balled up the business card in his fist and slammed it into Philip’s idiot face.

“Fuck!” Philip cried, clutching his face with both hands, down on the ground. Awareness came back to Charlie all at once, the calm evaporating into heart-pounding rage. Shane had a hand on his shoulder, letting out a triumphant whoop, and Charlie was still standing there with his arm extended like a Rock-Em Sock-Em Robot. His knuckles hurt *really fucking bad,* why did nobody ever tell you how bad it hurt to punch someone? A few villagers and a couple of tourists had gathered around, shocked murmurs passing through them. He tossed the crumpled card at Philip’s feet just as Lewis came pushing through the gathered crowd, followed by—oh, shit, Harvey.

“What happened?” Lewis demanded, looking from Philip to Charlie in outrage. Harvey watched Philip writhe around for a moment, then turned his gaze to Charlie; his eyebrows went up slightly, silently echoing Lewis’s question.

“He punched that man!” called a helpful tourist, earning her a glare from Shane, Marnie, and Pierre. Lewis turned to Charlie with his mouth hanging open.

“Is this *true?”*

“Yes!” Philip snapped, pulling his hands away from his face; his lip was fat and bleeding on one side, his cheekbone beet red. Charlie sighed.

“Yeah, I did.”

“Charlie! What in the—” Lewis spluttered, seemingly unsure where to focus his indignation. “You can’t just punch a tourist! What were you thinking?”

“He insulted Harvey,” Shane called, earning a flicker of surprise on Harvey’s face. Charlie desperately wished he knew what his boyfriend was thinking. Lewis waved his arms as though fighting off a horde of invisible bats, nearly beyond words.

“That’s no excuse! Think of the publicity, the damage to the economy, the—”

“Look, I’m sorry, Lewis—” Charlie tried to interrupt.

“—never get tourists at the Fair again, a complete scandal—”

“Lewis—”

“—grandfather would be rolling in his grave—”

“Hey, enough!” Charlie shouted, the last of his patience evaporating. “I know it was a stupid thing to do, okay, but I love Harvey, and I’m not going to sit here and listen to this dickhead talk about him like he—” His brain caught up to what he’d said, and his eyes locked on Harvey in horror, all the blood draining from his face. *Fuck,* what had he just done? Harvey stood frozen like a deer in the headlights for just a moment, then pushed through the crowd to where Charlie stood. Charlie had no idea what to expect, and he didn’t resist when Harvey seized him by the wrist and began to pull him away.

“Let’s go,” he said briskly, and Charlie followed, but Lewis blocked their path.

“Where do you think you’re going? We are not finished here!”

“We’ll be back in a moment, Mayor Lewis,” Harvey ground out through gritted teeth. It sounded so unlike his usual tone, it apparently even startled Lewis; the mayor stepped aside, fixing Charlie with a disgruntled glare as he passed.

Charlie obediently let himself be led away from the scene, and Harvey took them into the alley behind the clinic. Fear roiled in Charlie’s stomach. Was Harvey furious with him? Was he angry about the punch, or the public declaration? Or had Charlie said too much, too fast, and ruined everything? God, he wished he could take it back, Harvey would never have wanted it made public like that and anyway it was way too soon for him to be saying these things, even if Charlie had been totally obvious about it—

“What are we doing back here?” Charlie ventured, as Harvey released his wrist and took a few steps away. His back was to Charlie, and the set of his shoulders suggested he felt just as tense as Charlie did.

“Talking,” Harvey said, and turned around. His eyes burned into Charlie with an intensity he’d never seen there before, and Charlie couldn’t look away. Harvey opened his mouth to speak, took a breath, and closed it again. At last, he blurted out, “Did you mean it?”

“Did I—oh.” Charlie felt cornered; he didn’t know what answer Harvey wanted. There was nothing to do but be honest, he supposed. He squared his shoulders as best he could, summoned his courage, and said, “Yes. I did. I, um, I figured you knew.” The moment the words were out, he panicked, and the rest of it just flooded out of him. “Shit, Harvey, I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have said that to Lewis, I should have said it to *you,* I mean, at a better time, and I shouldn’t have punched him, I’m just—”

Charlie’s fumbling apology was cut off by Harvey’s mouth as it collided with his; what little breath he still had left him in a *whoosh* as Harvey propelled him against the plaster wall. Bewildered, he hung onto Harvey’s shoulders for support and kissed back, trying to

communicate what he couldn't put in words. Harvey's hands framed his face, pinning him in place as though he might try to run away, but Charlie had never wanted to escape less. At last, they broke apart for air, and Charlie gasped out, "You're not angry?"

"Angry?" Harvey huffed a laugh of disbelief, his eyes wide. "Charlie. You punched my ex-boyfriend and declared your love for me in front of the entire town. I've never been less angry in my life; I'm not convinced I'm *awake."*

"Oh, thank god," Charlie breathed, dropping his face to Harvey's shoulder. Harvey's arms came around him, and he rested his chin on Charlie's head.

"Did you really think I'd be upset?" he whispered. Charlie made a noncommittal noise.

"You're a private guy," he said. "And you had feelings for Philip once. I didn't know."

"My primary feeling for Philip is the hope that he'll leave us alone for the rest of our lives," Harvey replied darkly. "As for the rest of it...I suppose you're right, I have been a bit tight-lipped about my private life. But that was mostly because I didn't *have* one." He drew back a little, and Charlie met his eye; he wore the same expression he had after their first kiss, pink cheeks and a shy smile. "I'm finding I don't mind being more open about things, now that, well...I'm in love."

Charlie was sure he was going to sustain some kind of injury from the emotional whiplash of this day: winning the competition, encountering Philip, getting in a fight, worrying he'd ruined things with Harvey, and now this. But the joy that filled him was so complete, it pushed everything else right out of his mind. He felt a helpless smile unfold on his face, mirrored on Harvey's own.

"You are?"

"I am. With you, just for the record."

"Since when?"

"For months," Harvey admitted, glancing down and away.

"You *what?"* Charlie was stunned. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"I assumed it was just me."

"We're both idiots," Charlie said fervently, and Harvey let out a startled laugh. They kissed through it, clinging tightly to each other. At last, Charlie sighed.

"God, I want to take you home."

"I'd love nothing more," Harvey said. "Unfortunately, I think we have to go back and face the music."

"Right." Charlie let his arms fall, swallowing hard. "You don't have to come with me, if you don't want to. I don't think this is going to be pretty."

“Are you kidding? That fat lip was beautiful. I’m only sorry I missed the actual punch.”

They slowly made their way back to the scene. Strangely, Charlie felt calmer now, in the face of possible assault charges, than he had a few moments ago when he’d been worried about upsetting Harvey. Clearly, being in love for the first time had done something to his brain.

When they arrived, Philip was sitting on a hay bale with a bag of ice pressed to his cheek, scowling at the ground. Nearly all the tourists had dissipated; only the woman who’d tattled on Charlie remained, along with Marnie, Shane, Lewis, Pierre, Gus, Maru, and Sebastian. They stood in a loose circle, chatting amongst themselves. When Charlie and Harvey approached, Lewis stepped forward, clearly getting ready to launch back into his diatribe. Charlie raised a hand in a placating gesture.

“I’m sorry for the position this puts you in, Lewis. I’ll accept the consequences.”

“You’re fucking right you will,” Philip piped up from his hay bale, getting to his feet. “I’m putting a call into a town civilized enough to have an actual police presence, and I’m pressing charges.”

“Charges?” Marnie interjected, and everyone turned to look at her. “For what?”

Philip stared at her as though she’d grown an extra head. “For fucking assault!”

“But it wasn't assault,” she countered, tilting her head in apparent bewilderment. “It was self-defense. You went after Charlie first, he was just protecting himself.”

“What the fuck are you talking about,” Philip said flatly, and Charlie glanced at Harvey; his face was totally impassive, as though he had only a polite interest in the proceedings.

“We all saw it,” Shane agreed, hands in his pockets. “You took a swing at Charlie and he told you to stop, but you didn’t.”

Sebastian blew out a mouthful of cigarette smoke. “Good thing he dodged you,” he said. “You were really gunning for him.”

“This is ridiculous!” Philip shouted, practically spinning in place. Charlie fought down a totally inappropriate urge to laugh; could this possibly work? “That little asshole sucker-punched me in front of all of you! What is this?”

“I’m sorry, sir,” Pierre said calmly, pushing up his glasses, “but we can only tell you what we saw. That’s what we’d have to tell the police, too,” he added, to a chorus of nods. Philip’s jaw dropped, and he whirled on the lone remaining tourist.

“You! You saw it. Tell the mayor what happened.”

Charlie had worried about this, but it turned out the woman was less talkative when contradicting half a dozen people. “I don’t know,” she said slowly, chewing her thumbnail. “I definitely saw him hit you—”

“See! She saw it!”

"—but I didn't see what happened before that, I turned around just then. I guess it might have been self-defense. I really can't say."

"That's right, because you and I were talking, and I saw it over your shoulder," Gus said.

"I was standing right over there, I'm pretty sure I heard him threatening Charlie," Maru added, and her brother nodded.

"Me, too."

Philip looked utterly aghast, an expression exaggerated by his bruised face. He turned slowly, looking everyone in the eye, before at last turning to Harvey. Charlie prepared to intervene—if this dick tried to talk shit to Harvey's face he'd give him a matching set of bruises on the other cheek, assault charges be damned—but the fight seemed to have gone out of him.

"Harvey?" he tried, his voice tiny and meek. It was such a transparent ploy that Charlie snorted. "You know me. You know I didn't attack him. Are you really going to believe this?"

Harvey straightened his glasses, looking lost in thought for a moment, then met Philip's eye. "Yes, I think I am," he said, and Charlie hid a grin behind his hand. "Anyway, I didn't see it happen. I'll defer to all these trustworthy witnesses."

"Harvey!"

"You should see a doctor for that lip," Harvey added, and oh God, Charlie was going to die from the struggle not to burst out laughing, they had to get out of there *immediately.* Harvey's hand wrapped around his and squeezed, and he knew the feeling was mutual.

"Thank you for visiting the Fair," Lewis said feebly, and Philip stalked away with a huff of disgust. Lewis looked slowly around the circle of villagers, then fixed a piercing stare on Charlie, one eyebrow raised. "You're lucky there were so many reliable people around to see your *fight,"* he said pointedly. "Be careful, would you? You might not be so lucky the next time."

"Will do, Mayor Lewis," Charlie managed, still squeezing Harvey's hand. "Sorry for all the commotion. Um...we'll just be going, then."

"Please do."

They strolled away from the circle as casually as they could, Harvey not letting go of his hand. "Jesus, I have a lot of drinks to buy," Charlie sighed; the relief was just starting to sink in. "I think I should probably just give Marnie that diamond. Maybe all the diamonds I—oh, are we not going back to the farm?" Harvey had begun steering Charlie toward the clinic, and the doctor glanced down at him without slowing his footsteps.

"Honey," he said in an undertone, "I hope you won't think me completely shallow, but I've been desperate to get your pants off for the last thirty minutes, and if we try to make it to the farm there's a very real possibility I'll die."

"We can't have that," Charlie said seriously, and laughed as Harvey broke into a jog.

The clinic's front door slammed shut and locked behind him, and before Charlie could even glance back, Harvey was propelling him toward the door to the exam area. "Jesus, Harvey," he laughed breathlessly, fumbling against him as they both tried to fit through the narrow doorway at once. Harvey seized his face in both hands again and kissed him fiercely, his tongue roaming around Charlie's mouth and his hips rolling against his abdomen. Charlie worried he might actually come standing in this doorway if they didn't move soon, so with a final thrust of his tongue, he disentangled himself. He started toward the stairs to Harvey's apartment, but Harvey's fingers closed around his wrist and tugged sharply to the left—toward the exam room. All the air left Charlie's lungs.

"In here?" he asked in a hoarse whisper, stumbling after Harvey, who still gripped his wrist as though he might run off. "Not your apartment?"

"Too far," Harvey declared, kicking the door shut without taking his eyes off Charlie. He walked forward, stepping further and further into Charlie's space until he had to step back. When the backs of his knees hit the exam table, Harvey gave a soft one-handed push to the middle of his chest, sending Charlie thudding back onto the table. Charlie felt dazed; his expectations for how this would happen were rapidly being recalibrated. Harvey's slender fingers had already managed to open his pants, and Charlie obediently lifted his hips so they could be pulled impatiently off. He had just opened his mouth to ask what Harvey wanted when the doctor abruptly dropped onto his stool and pushed Charlie's thighs apart.

"Oh," Charlie breathed, and without any further fanfare Harvey lunged forward and swallowed him. The sweet, slick heat of Harvey's mouth wiped any remaining hesitation about the setting from Charlie's brain, replacing it with the urgent need to thrust, *now, hard.* His legs dangled uselessly from the end of the table, and he couldn't get enough leverage to do anything but lie there; sensing his trouble, Harvey lifted both of Charlie's thighs and settled them on his shoulders, never breaking his rhythm. Like this, Charlie could sit up on his elbows a little and watch, and *Jesus* that was a beautiful sight—Harvey held his gaze as his head bobbed up and down, sucking Charlie's length down his throat as though desperate to bring him off.

Charlie realized that was going to be a foregone conclusion soon; the familiar tension was building, heat spreading from the base of his spine, and he didn't want to disappoint Harvey if this was only the pregame. He gave Harvey a little warning squeeze with his legs, trying to organize his thoughts into coherent speech.

"Harvey," he panted, taking note of the way Harvey's eyes darkened at his name on Charlie's lips, "you're so good, *so good,* I'm gonna—do you want me to—"

In response, Harvey moaned low in his throat, eyes falling shut, and picked up the pace. That was that, Charlie supposed, and dropped flat onto his back so he could fist both of his hands in Harvey's hair. Harvey moaned again in approval, and Charlie thrust shallowly into his mouth, trying desperately to control his hips. Those beautiful hands moved from his thighs to his ass, urging it upward, and Charlie realized with a jolt of lust what Harvey was asking him to do. He let go at last, gripping Harvey's hair and fucking his mouth in earnest. It was too good, too much, he couldn't help himself, he was *there*—

With a hoarse cry, he came down Harvey's throat, holding the doctor's head in place by his hair and with his legs. He knew he needed to let go, wondered where his manners had gone, but he couldn't seem to make his fingers work. Judging by the noises coming from Harvey and the fact that one of his hands had left Charlie's ass to travel down his own body, Charlie thought he probably didn't mind. The last drop spilled, he finally released Harvey's hair and fell back against the table, panting. Harvey's face came into view, and Charlie shivered at the sight of his Adam's apple bobbing as he swallowed. Swallowed *my come,* Charlie amended with delight.

Charlie just needed a moment to recover; just a second to lie here, then he'd get himself together and return the favor. Before he could say as much, though, Harvey had clambered up and knelt over him on the table. He straddled Charlie's waist, fully dressed but with his cock protruding from his open fly, and Charlie stared in awe as he began to stroke himself. His fist flew over his erection, his teeth digging hard into his lower lip. Charlie wondered how long he had been touching himself; he was clearly pretty far along.

"Do you want me to—?" he began again, running his hands up Harvey's clothed thighs, but Harvey shook his head.

"I'm so close," he ground out, and the hoarseness of his voice made Charlie's spent cock give a hopeful twitch. "Fuck, Charlie—just stay there, just let me—"

"Yeah, come on," Charlie urged in a whisper, giving Harvey's thighs a squeeze. "God, you're so hot, come on—"

Harvey thrust his hand down and grabbed a fistful of Charlie's shirt, shoving it up to expose his belly and chest. Almost in the same moment, his entire body tensed, his head flinging back. He came with a long, wordless groan, painting Charlie's exposed skin with his come. Charlie hadn't expected it to be so mind-blowingly hot, being marked as someone else's territory, but somehow being marked as *Harvey's* made it unbelievably sexy. Harvey finally came back online, slowly tilting his head forward until he met Charlie's gaze, and sat back on Charlie's thighs.

"I don't know what came over me," he said, his voice still wrecked from Charlie's cock down his throat. "Are you...was that okay?"

Is he joking? In lieu of an answer, Charlie ran a finger through the cooling semen on his ribs, then put it in his mouth to taste it. Harvey let out another moan, as though he were coming again, and let the tension fall out of his shoulders.

"You're going to be the death of me," he sighed, but it didn't sound like a complaint.

Charlie grinned. "Not for years and years, though," he said. "I've got *so* much more to do to you before then." The look in Harvey's eyes changed a little and Charlie realized what he'd said, but he just lifted his chin a little, daring Harvey to contradict him. A slow smile spread across Harvey's face, one of the smiles Charlie loved best.

"I look forward to it, then." The doctor reached over to the counter and grabbed a fistful of paper towels, beginning to wipe at Charlie's stomach.

“Your eventual death at my hand?”

Harvey smirked, glancing up from his cleaning. “I look forward to *whatever* you want to do with your hands,” he deadpanned, and then he had to pause in his attentions while Charlie let out a full-body laugh. The moment he tugged Charlie’s shirt back into place, Charlie pulled him down into his arms, kissing him for a long moment. God, this was heavenly: the sex, yes (which was much more frequent and imaginative than Charlie had dared hope), but the rest of it too, the laughing and lazy post-coital kisses in the arms of a man he adored. He was beginning to wonder how he’d ever survived without it, and to hope he’d never have to again.

Harvey intertwined his fingers with Charlie’s, and Charlie winced a little at the pressure on his sore hand. Drawing back, Harvey looked at him in concern before realizing; then, tenderness all over his face, he pulled Charlie’s hand to his mouth and pressed feather-light kisses along his bruised knuckles.

“You didn’t have to do that, you know,” Harvey murmured, still continuing his journey across Charlie’s hand. *“Not* that it wasn't hugely impressive and arousing, of course.”

“I couldn’t help it,” Charlie confessed, feeling an echo of his anger rise up in him again. “That smug asshole. He acted like you belonged to him.”

“I never belonged to him,” Harvey said quietly, his face unreadable.

“I know you didn’t. You don’t belong to *anybody.”* Charlie reached up with his good hand and stroked the hair back out of Harvey’s face, his gaze searching. “But I think...if you don’t mind me saying so...you belong *with* me.” He straightened Harvey’s glasses. “And I belong with you.”

Harvey seemed to be struggling for words. “I don’t mind,” he whispered at last. “I...quite the opposite, in fact.”

A smile ghosted over Charlie’s face, and if it was anything like the expression on Harvey’s, he knew he looked totally besotted. He pulled him down for another kiss, gentle and slow. “I love you, Harvey.”

Harvey looked just as radiant as when Charlie had first confirmed it back in the alleyway, and Charlie hoped that would take a long, long time to fade. “And I love you,” he answered, and if Charlie wasn't the luckiest man on Earth, he didn’t know who was.

Chapter End Notes

Bye, Philip!

Tomorrow: wall-to-wall fluff. Just, like, 9000 words of it.

Chapter 13: Fall, Year 1

Chapter Summary

> Harvey tries new things. Charlie has a doctor's appointment. Spirit's Eve arrives, and Harvey faces (some of) his fears.

Chapter Notes

> I think it's high time we went on some more dates with these two, don't you? Only content warnings for this chapter are brief NSFW and tooth-rotting fluff. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“You’ve got to stop grinning like that,” Maru complained, passing Harvey at the coffee pot on her way to her desk. “It’s weird.”

“It’s weird that I’m happy?” Harvey hadn’t even been aware of what he was doing with his face, but a quick glance into the glass of the exam area door confirmed it: he was smiling at nothing as he poured his coffee. He tried to stifle it, but it made the effect worse—a little frightening, actually.

“Do you *really* want me to answer that?” In response, Harvey kicked the base of her chair, sending her rolling a few feet to the right. She caught herself on her desk and began tidying up folders, completely unruffled. “I take it things are good, then.”

“...Yes. They are.” In truth, Harvey didn’t know how to express just *how good* things were. He loved Charlie, and unbelievably, Charlie loved him. Weeks had gone by since the fair, and no police had ever showed up to deliver charges against Charlie. He’d woken up this morning in the farmhouse with Charlie’s lips against his forehead, after falling asleep together post-coitus last night. The long walks to and from the farm, and Charlie’s cooking, had him in the best shape of his adult life. They had plans to go to the Stardrop tonight, then go back to Charlie’s place to watch *Star Trek: The Next Generation* (with Harvey teasing Charlie about his childhood crush on *Riker,* he knew that now). A weekend of glorious weather stretched before them, with no plans at all beyond building a bonfire in the fire pit Charlie had just finished. Harvey’s life was better than he could ever remember. This endless happiness, looking forward to what came tomorrow: it was a brand-new feeling.

On impulse, he decided to try something else new. “Are you free this weekend?”

“I think so. Why? Need me to watch the clinic?”

“Do you want to come to Charlie’s for a bonfire tomorrow night?”

At this, Maru stopped her shuffling and looked up, an expression of deep suspicion on her face. “You’re asking me to...hang out? Outside of work?”

“Well—”

“Is something wrong? Are you dying?”

“No!” Yoba, this had been a terrible idea. He gestured wildly, as though trying to snatch words out of the air. “I just. I don’t know. I thought it might be...fun.”

“Fun,” Maru repeated, as though she had never heard the word before. Harvey sighed.

“Forget it.”

“No, no, come on. I’d love to come.”

“Really?”

“Of course I would, dummy.” She stood and joined him at the coffee pot, bumping her shoulder against his arm as she poured. “You and Charlie are two of my best friends. It sounds great. I’m just surprised, is all.” She took a sip of her coffee and fixed her gaze on him over the rim of her mug; Harvey looked down into his cup, a little embarrassed. “He’s a good influence on you,” she added softly, and Harvey grinned again.

“I know.”

“—so he went looking for me in the chicken coop, and when I came out of the house, he was running full-tilt through the cranberries with Pizza chasing him,” Charlie was saying, mimicking Harvey’s flailing motions with his hands, as the guests around the bonfire collapsed with laughter. Harvey sat primly, refusing to join in, but he winked at Charlie over a quirk of his mustache.

“I’m glad my near-death experience amused you, dear,” he said, and Charlie grinned at him.

“Aw, come on, Pizza wouldn’t hurt a fly.” He eyed Bones, who lay with his head on his paws beside Jas, looking deeply unimpressed. “Maybe a dog, though,” he conceded.

“So you won’t be hanging up the stethoscope to become a farmer, then?” Marnie teased him, and Harvey shook his head.

“I think aside from the occasional harvesting help, I’d better leave it to him.”

Their group was a little bigger than Harvey was usually comfortable with, but two beers and Charlie’s warm body pressed against his side were doing a lot to fortify him. Maru had come, as promised, and Charlie had been so delighted to hear it that he’d invited Shane, too. Of course, he’d done that within earshot of Marnie, who responded so enthusiastically, he’d

invited her as well. But she and Shane couldn't both leave without Jas, and so the little girl had tagged along. Rounding out the party was Billy, Jas's teddy bear, whose presence Harvey appreciated as he didn't talk much.

"He's a nice doggy," Jas whispered, so quietly Harvey barely heard her, as her fingers skimmed over Bones's fur. Bones was behaving himself uncharacteristically well, apparently thrilled to have a visitor closer to his own height. Harvey smiled at her, giving Bones a scratch behind the ears.

"That he is."

She stole a glance up at him, and he waited patiently. There were few things he missed about Zuzu City or his practice there, but working with children was one of them. He'd been a family doctor, caring for children all the way through adulthood, and seeing his smallest patients grow had been his favorite part of the job. In Pelican Town, there were only Vincent and Jas now, both of whom were great kids, but who seemed intimidated by him. He was used to that; the mustache, the glasses, and the medical instruments tended to put him firmly in the category of "serious grown-up," and some kids were more awestruck by that than others.

It *was* still a bit surreal seeing his former child patients grow older. Six years wasn't an eternity, but it was long enough for teens to become adults. Sam, Haley, Alex, and Abigail had all been in their mid-teens when he'd arrived in town, and all of them were in their twenties now. When Harvey had learned that Caroline had been pushing Abigail toward Charlie, he'd nearly choked on his coffee. She couldn't possibly be old enough for him, could she? But she was twenty-one, a bit young, but not a child anymore. Even Maru had been his patient before she'd been his employee, though she at least had been a legal adult when they'd first met.

Sometimes, when he and Charlie lay together in bed or strolled along the path between the farm and town, Harvey almost felt brave enough to tell him. That he'd always dreamed of a family one day, of children to teach about music and airplanes, of adopting a baby and giving that little one the family he'd never had himself. It was a dream that had gone dormant long ago, but falling in love with Charlie had brought it back to life. Could he...would he ever want…? The words came to his lips over and over again, but he never voiced them. He couldn't bear to think about the decision he would face if Charlie didn't want the same thing.

"Uncle Shane told me," Jas ventured shyly, "that this puppy fell down a hole and got hurt, and you fixed him." Bones rolled onto his back, lazily demanding belly rubs, and she sank both hands into his fur. "Did that really happen?"

"It did," Harvey confirmed, smiling. "Charlie was digging a well, and Bones here fell down and hurt his leg. I'm a people doctor, not a vet, but there was nobody else who could help, so I came over and gave him some stitches."

"What are stitches?" Curiosity had apparently overcome shyness.

"Sometimes, if you get a big cut, a doctor has to take a needle and thread and sew your skin back together."

“Ew!”

“It is a little gross. But it helps.”

“Oh, Vincent had those, didn’t he?”

“He did.”

The two of them continued to chat about the various gross medical things Harvey had done to patients around town, both petting a blissful Bones in the middle. Across the circle, Marnie and Maru were deep in conversation about an automatic feeder, and beside him, Charlie chatted away at Shane. As he spoke, Charlie reached over and rested a casual hand on Harvey’s knee, and Harvey felt a lovely warmth spread through his entire body from that spot. He caught Maru’s eye, and she smiled at him, eyes twinkling behind her firelit glasses. He mirrored her expression before turning back to Jas, who had tugged impatiently on his sleeve.

“What would happen if you fed a crawdad to a cow?”

“Well, I’m not a vet, but that’s really not a good idea…”

“Oh my God,” Harvey managed, his eyes falling shut. He couldn’t see Charlie, but he could *hear* the smirk in his voice.

“God, huh? What happened to Yoba?”

“Yoba’s not here right now.” Charlie’s hands smoothed down Harvey’s sides, coming to rest on his hips; Harvey hung his head down between his arms, breathing hard.

“Just a little more,” Charlie murmured soothingly. “You’re doing so, so good.”

It had started with the weather. They’d planned on meeting in town and going to the Stardrop, but the day had turned cold and wet, and Charlie hadn’t made it into town by the time Harvey had closed the clinic for the day. Thinking longingly of the farmhouse’s enormous fireplace, Harvey had thrown on a raincoat and set out for the farm. Charlie had just been pulling his boots on to come into town, and had been only too happy for the change of plans. They’d built a roaring fire, eaten a simple dinner on the floor in front of it, and then decided to pile every blanket and pillow Charlie owned down there.

Charlie and Harvey had spent ages just kissing and sliding against each other, enjoying the blissful warmth of the fire and their entangled bodies. Finally wanting more, Charlie had spent nearly half an hour preparing Harvey, opening him with a thoroughness that had left Harvey nearly sobbing with want. He couldn’t remember a time in his life when anyone had treated this as anything more than a necessary step to the main event, but Charlie’s gaze on him was rapt with fascination. When at last Charlie had slid home, Harvey had been so far gone he’d nearly come on the spot. Charlie had pulled him back from the edge, again and again, so many times that Harvey thought he might die soon from the lack of blood in his

brain. Some time later (one hour? Two? He'd lost count), Harvey was propped on his knees and elbows, Charlie buried to the hilt inside him. Charlie's callused hands stroked up and down his back, waiting patiently for him to calm down again, never letting him tip over all the way. Harvey was more desperate to come than he'd ever been in his life, but he trusted Charlie, believed him when he said it would be the best orgasm he'd ever had.

"Do you want to stop?" Charlie asked him softly, leaning over to press open-mouthed kisses between his shoulder blades. "If it's too much, just tell me."

The temptation to beg for release was overwhelming, but Harvey shook his head, tight and frantic. "Keep going," he ground out, trying not to think about coming and failing to think about *anything* else. "I trust you."

Charlie groaned, gripping his hipbones tighter and rocking deep inside him. "God, Harvey," he breathed, "you're amazing, you're so good, I love you…"

Harvey was too far gone to respond, but he felt Charlie's words all through his body, warming him as much as the fire. Part of him was still in disbelief: Charlie loved *him,* just as he was, not *if you'd just speak up a little more* or *if you lost the mustache* or *if you worked out more often.* It was more than he'd ever dreamed of, so good he sometimes still lay awake by Charlie's side at night, letting waves of gratitude wash over him. He was so thoroughly besotted he would have been fine with totally perfunctory sex, but Charlie was the best lover he'd ever had—and the most patient, as he was demonstrating tonight.

All at once, it was too much, and Harvey instinctively knew he wasn't going to be able to stave it off this time. "Charlie," he keened, trying to warn him. Charlie let out a moan, thrusting faster, harder, *more.*

"That's it, baby, oh God, I'm there too—come on, come with me—" He reached down and wrapped a hand around Harvey's aching erection as he pounded into him, and after two strokes Harvey was lost. He felt the orgasm crash over him like a tidal wave, was sure he was shouting but couldn't stop himself, his entire body clenching around Charlie's cock. Oh, Yoba, Charlie hadn't been lying; he had never felt anything like this before, *never,* he thought he was maybe going to die of pleasure. Charlie thrust shallowly into him a few more times and then he was coming too, pushing in as far as he could and going still. Harvey felt the hot rush flooding deep inside him, relishing every sweet moment of it. When at last they had both finished, Harvey's knees went out from under him, and it was only Charlie's hands on his hips that kept him from falling into the mess beneath him.

"Whoa, whoa," Charlie laughed, easing him onto his side as he gently pulled out. "You okay?"

"No," Harvey mumbled, already fighting back sleep. "Yes. Oh my God."

Charlie lay down behind him, spooning close and throwing an arm over his waist. "You said that before," he whispered, nosing behind Harvey's ear. "We'll make a heathen of you yet."

"Mm."

“Are you still awake?”

“Mm.”

“I love you, V.”

“Love you, Charlie.”

“—so this is actually the second time Miles Davis recorded this, but I like this version better,” Harvey was saying, coming around the couch with two freshly refilled glasses of wine. Charlie stood in the middle of his apartment, examining the sleeve of the LP they were listening to. It was one of Harvey’s favorites, and they’d decided to spend the evening in his apartment so he could share some of the music he loved with Charlie. He held out a glass, and Charlie accepted it with a warm little smile.

“Oh yeah? Why’s that?”

“Well, this one was with the Quintet, and Red Garland’s piano is so beautiful here,” Harvey continued. “It’s just...haunting. You can feel the longing in it, without needing any words.”

“I see what you mean,” Charlie said quietly, and put both the sleeve and his wine down on the end table. Harvey wondered where he was going, but then he stepped forward into Harvey’s space, his hands sliding around to rest on Harvey’s waist. The doctor’s breath caught.

“Keep telling me about it,” Charlie murmured, swaying their hips a little. It was surprisingly difficult for Harvey to organize his thoughts, with Charlie’s body so close to his own. He set his own wine on the table, lifting his hands to Charlie’s upper arms, and just danced with him. It was such a peaceful feeling, swaying gently with his boyfriend to an old favorite song, nothing but the two of them and the music that had kept him company for so many years. He pressed his cheek against the top of Charlie’s head, letting his eyes drift closed. A vibration moved through his skin, a little hum of contentment from Charlie. He was so thoroughly content, he danced for nearly a full minute in silence before remembering that Charlie had asked him to keep talking.

“Um,” Harvey said at last, forgetting where he’d left off. Charlie let out a soft laugh.

“Red Garland’s piano,” he prompted.

“Yes. Well. The trumpet has this, ah...smoky feel...and um…” Charlie had tucked his face in against Harvey’s neck now; Harvey could feel his lowered eyelashes against his skin. He swallowed hard, letting his body follow Charlie’s movements and feeling every drop of the wine he’d drunk already.

“And?” Charlie breathed against the skin of Harvey’s throat. His mouth was moving there, not quite kissing, just dragging his lower lip over Harvey’s five o’clock shadow. It was

maddening in the best way; Harvey felt the music and wine and dancing and almost-kissing, all mixed into a potent spell that thrummed through his veins.

"And John Coltrane only played two notes on the whole song," he managed, feeling obscurely proud of himself for having managed to get it out. Charlie's lips had traveled further north, caressing the skin just beneath his ear, and the feeling of his breath there made Harvey weak in the knees. Yoba, he was like a teenager these days. Insatiable.

"Which notes?" Charlie asked, tracing the tip of his tongue against the shell of Harvey's ear, and suddenly Harvey couldn't spare one iota of his attention for jazz.

"No fucking idea," he exhaled, and took Charlie's jaw in his hand, turning his head to capture that exploring mouth. His other arm went around Charlie's body and dragged him in closer, pulling them flush from lips to knees; he thrust a knee between Charlie's legs, and felt light-headed with want at the feeling of that hard cock grinding into his thigh. They had abandoned their dancing now, just unabashedly making out in the middle of the living room while *It Never Entered My Mind* continued to spin on, hands and mouths moving over every inch of skin they could reach. He began to walk Charlie backwards, not letting up his kissing or groping for a moment. As they toppled over onto the couch, hands already fumbling at each other's waistbands, Harvey had one last thought about the music.

Sorry, Miles. You're not the only man in my life anymore.

Some days at the clinic were absolute murder. Today, Harvey had dealt with the usual autumn barrage of runny noses and low-grade fevers, but he'd also had to help carry an unconscious Alex into the OR after he'd been knocked out cold playing gridball with Sam. Alex was fine, of course—Harvey privately thought it would take a lot more than a knock on the ground to get through his skull—but Yoba, he was heavy. On top of that, Pierre was sick, and Caroline had dropped by to ask if Harvey would be a good neighbor and help unload a delivery that had come to the store. He couldn't say no, of course, and so he'd spent the better part of an hour shuffling boxes back and forth.

He felt a bone-deep relief when the farmhouse came into view; he'd taken forty-five frigid minutes to walk there, holding himself like an old man. His back ached, his legs were stiff, and his shoulders burned. *I really need to work out more,* he thought irritably. He hoped Charlie wouldn't mind him dropping in; they hadn't made any plans for the evening, since Harvey's appointment calendar had been so full. But he desperately needed to relax, and sitting on the couch wrapped up in Charlie's arms sounded like the most relaxing thing he could imagine.

As he limped up the steps, a heavenly smell wafted to him, and his stomach gave an indignant rumble. He'd forgotten to eat today, too. He knocked on the door, feeling foolish for turning up on Charlie's doorstep and begging for food like a stray dog. He supposed it had worked out well for Bones, though. Maybe Charlie would keep him too.

The door swung open, silhouetting Charlie's form against the light and warmth inside as though he himself were the source of it. "V!" Charlie said, his face lighting up; Harvey

mirrored it with a sheepish grin. “I didn’t know you were coming tonight, I thought you were busy!”

“I hope that’s okay,” Harvey replied, running a hand through his hair in embarrassment. “I just wanted to see you.”

“Of course it’s okay,” Charlie assured him, tilting his head as though puzzled by the question. “It’s always okay, darlin’, I always want to see you.” He leaned forward and pressed a kiss to Harvey’s forehead, their heights reversed with Charlie standing two steps higher. Harvey felt most of his tension drain away in the wake of Charlie’s sincere enthusiasm. Apparently, he didn’t have to feel bad about needing Charlie’s affection. He filed this away as yet another thing to marvel over later, when he was alone with his thoughts.

“Come on, come in, I was just finishing up dinner.” Harvey followed Charlie inside, where he saw Bones lying beside the kitchen table, clearly begging; a mostly-empty bowl of beef stew and a hunk of cornbread were perched in front of Charlie’s usual chair, and a book was open beside the bowl: *Leviathan Wakes.*

“You hungry?” Charlie called over his shoulder, already heading for the stove. Harvey’s stomach growled again, and he nodded weakly. “Have a seat, I’ll bring you some. Just drop your coat wherever.” Harvey sank gratefully into the chair across from Charlie’s, too exhausted even to make conversation.

A steaming bowl appeared in front of him, along with a beer and a spoon; Harvey tasted the stew, then let out a little moan of pleasure. *Yoba,* Charlie had become a good cook. “Good?” Charlie asked, pushing the cornbread toward him as he cleared his own bowl away.

“So good,” Harvey confirmed, tearing off a piece of bread. “All your vegetables?”

“Yep. Picked most of them today.” Harvey startled a little as a warm weight settled onto his shoulders; glancing down at himself, he saw that Charlie had draped a woolen blanket around him. The farmer came around to sit across from him, propping his chin on his hand and smiling the way he had that first night in the Secret Woods. Harvey felt his cheeks warm. “You looked frozen,” Charlie explained.

Harvey wanted to say something poignant. *How did I survive before you? How do you always know exactly what I need, even when I don’t ask? How did you just drop into my life out of the clear blue sky?* But no meaningful words would form, and finally he settled on, “Thank you.”

He was terrible at expressing himself, but fortunately, Charlie was excellent at understanding anyway; his eyes softened above his warm smile. “Anytime.” Harvey held his gaze for a moment before going back to his stew, and Charlie asked, “Rough day?”

“You have no idea.”

They chatted while Harvey ate, Charlie seeming content just to sit with him and toss the occasional morsel of cornbread to Bones. Gradually, the heat of the stew and the blanket seeped into his frozen bones, and he felt himself relaxing. The dog settled across his feet, the

beer gave him a pleasant warmth in his belly, and all in all, the day was ending much better than it had begun. As he finished the last crumbs of his food, Charlie took the bowl to the sink and gestured over his shoulder.

“Why don’t you get undressed and get into bed? I’ll be right in.”

“Oh,” Harvey said, his face burning. Of course, he should have assumed Charlie would expect sex; they fooled around almost every night they were together, with the exception of the occasional times they fell asleep on the couch watching TV. It still *sounded* good, but Harvey’s sore and exhausted body simply didn’t have anything left to give. Still, he had never turned Charlie down before; it was rude of him to show up asking for food and company and then refuse anything more, wasn't it? “I, um—the thing is—”

Charlie turned around with amusement in his eyes. “Not for *that,”* he assured him, drying his hands on a tea towel. “I can see how stiff you are from a mile away. I’ll help you.”

Harvey barely dared hope he was understanding correctly. “Help me?”

“Lie down on top of the covers, OK? Be right there.”

When he was arranged on the bed, shivering a little now that he was away from the fire, Charlie came in and rummaged around in a drawer. Harvey was too tired to really follow what he was doing, but a few moments later, he heard the strike of a match. The overhead light went off, replaced by the soft glow of a few candles on the dresser. He felt the dip in the mattress as Charlie climbed up, and then the warmth of Charlie’s leg pressing against his hip.

“Comfy?” Charlie asked, and Harvey heard a soft click—a small container being opened. He gave a hum of assent, listening to Charlie rub his hands together. A moment later, he felt those warm, callused hands slide against his shoulders.

“Oh,” Harvey groaned, burying his face in the pillow, as Charlie began to knead at his aching muscles. It felt even more heavenly than he dimly remembered, from the time he and a few other students had traded massages during their muscle injury unit in med school. That had been what, fourteen years ago? Could that really be the last time? He racked his brain, but nothing else came up; he’d given Philip dozens, maybe hundreds, of massages, but couldn’t remember him ever returning the favor.

“You know,” Charlie was saying softly above him, as his strong hands worked their way down Harvey’s spine, “it’s okay to ask.”

“Hmm?”

“When you need help.” He changed direction, kneading across the small of Harvey’s back; Harvey tried not to arch into the touch. “You always keep it to yourself, when you’re hurting. You can tell me, I’ll help you.”

Harvey felt a pang of shame. “I’m just...more used to being the caregiver, I guess,” he said sheepishly.

“I know that, darlin’. And you’re really good at it. But sometimes caregivers need care, too.” Harvey felt Charlie’s lips press against the skin of his shoulder blade. “I told you before, back in the woods. I want to take care of you.”

Those simple words filled Harvey with an emotion he couldn’t name, something deep and vast. It felt somewhere between *relief* and *vulnerability* and *comfort.* In truth, he’d never felt comfortable asking anyone for anything, because those he depended on had nearly always let him down. His parents had left him; his uncle had sent him away; his school friends had abandoned him; Philip had broken his heart. The less he needed people, the less likely he was to end up blindsided and miserable again.

But Charlie. Charlie, whose strong, steady hands now worked down his aching legs. Charlie, who fed him, and smiled at him, and let him have his own space while always leaving the door open. Charlie who loved him better than he’d ever been loved before. He could lean on Charlie, he thought, and not end up falling on his face. They could lean on *each other.*

“Thank you,” he murmured, for the second time that night. Charlie didn’t respond, just gave his ankle a little squeeze before continuing on to rub his feet. Harvey felt like melting butter; he wouldn’t have been surprised to open his eyes and see himself spreading flat into the sheets. Every muscle in his body felt warm and pliable. He lay in contented silence while Charlie finished up his feet and moved onto his hands, and by the time his last little finger was worked out, he was right on the edge of sleep.

“Lie down, I’ll do yours,” he mumbled into the pillows, and Charlie laughed.

“Not tonight, Number One. Get some sleep. I’ll need one some other time, I’m sure.” The heavy blanket was worked out from under his limp body and then pulled up over him, and when he felt the mattress shift again, he opened his eyes. Charlie lay inches away, an impossibly soft smile on his face, running his fingers through Harvey’s hair. That face leaned in close and kissed him, and Harvey drifted off to sleep with the feeling of Charlie’s mouth still on his lips.

“All right, I need to listen to your lungs for a moment. Could you lift your shirt for me?”

“I will if you do yours.”

“Charlie,” Harvey sighed, giving him what he hoped was a reproachful look over his glasses. Charlie sat on the end of the exam table, swinging his legs and looking utterly unrepentant. “I’m trying to conduct an exam here. It’s just routine.”

It didn’t feel especially routine to Harvey, though. He’d always had a firm rule about not dating his patients—when he and Philip had gotten together, he’d referred him to a new doctor—but in Pelican Town, that wasn’t really an option. Harvey had made his peace with that, and had been confident in his ability to give Charlie totally professional medical care. But he’d underestimated how thoroughly *unprofessional* Charlie was going to be, and they hadn’t even gotten to anything all that invasive yet.

“I’m sorry! It’s hard!” he complained. Dropping his voice, he added, “I mean, it’s not *my* fault this room is full of sexy memories. You could have thought of that before you threw me down on this table and su—”

“Yes, yes, *sorry,”* Harvey hissed, glancing at the door. He knew Maru could hear through it if she was motivated, though he hoped their relationship was old enough news not to pique her interest. Charlie smirked and raised his shirt, hiking it up in a single fistful to expose the line of his abs in the most blatantly showy way possible. Harvey placed the stethoscope against his abdomen, mortified to feel his face heat. Maybe, if he tilted his head to listen more attentively, Charlie wouldn’t notice how pink he was.

“Are you all right, doctor? You look a little flushed.”

Well. There went that plan.

“Shh,” Harvey managed, “I need to listen.” Charlie actually did fall silent, for which Harvey was desperately grateful. He listened to the slow, reassuringly healthy sounds of Charlie’s breathing through his earpieces, making sure all was well there before moving the diaphragm up to Charlie’s heart. Just as the last time he’d listened to it, after the slime incident back in the summer, it beat more rapidly than the expected resting heart rate of a young, healthy man. He glanced up, intending to ask Charlie about it, but the question died on his lips at the look on Charlie’s face. He stared at Harvey, eyes dark and focused, his mouth slightly open; as Harvey watched, he bit his bottom lip. Harvey felt his own heart rate double in response.

“Yoba,” Harvey groaned, pulling the earpieces out, “what are you *doing* to me? I haven’t gotten flustered in an exam since *med school.”*

“I’m not doing anything!” Charlie protested, though the twitching corner of his mouth said otherwise.

“You’re—with the, the biting-your-lip thing, and—”

“Did you want me to do something *else* with my lips, or—”

Harvey surged forward, his hand coming around the back of Charlie’s head, and kissed him. Charlie’s mouth opened in a gasp of surprise and delight, and Harvey took that as an invitation to thrust his tongue in; he felt Charlie’s hands come up and fist in the back of his jacket. Harvey pulled out all the stops, doing all he could to reduce Charlie to a wrecked and boneless mess, before pinning him down to the exam table. Charlie wrapped a leg around Harvey’s waist, grinding upward, and then—

Beep!

Harvey pulled back with a self-satisfied smile, waggling the thermometer he’d run over Charlie’s forehead while he was distracted. “Ninety-nine point zero,” he read out, as Charlie sputtered in indignation. “A tiny bit elevated, but that’s within range, given the state you’re in.”

“Did you...did you seriously just take my *temperature?”*

“I should have tried that sooner. It’s much easier to get your vitals that way.” Harvey sat back, straightening his tie and smoothing his coat. “Now. Let’s test your reflexes.”

“Ugh,” Charlie huffed, flopping dramatically back onto the table. His flattened position brought certain elevated parts of his anatomy into sharp relief. “You’re just going to leave me like this?”

“Yes, because this is a *doctor’s appointment,* and you are in a *doctor’s office.”*

Charlie shook his head, peering at Harvey down the length of his nose. “I had no idea you were so vindictive,” he complained. “Cruel, even.”

“Mm, yes, wanting you to be healthy. What a monster I am.” He looked at Charlie, hopelessly aroused and pouting at the ceiling, and decided to take pity on him. Harvey sighed. “Look,” he prompted; Charlie glanced at him, raising an eyebrow. “Let me finish your exam now, and I’ll bring my bag over tonight. Okay? I can, um...make a house call. After hours.”

Charlie’s face lit up. “Really?”

“Really.”

Just like that, Charlie’s grin was back, as wicked as ever. “Oh, doctor,” he drawled, in a tone that both excited and terrified Harvey. He was either going to regret this, or it was going to be the best night of his life. “I’m going to need *so* much medical attention.”

He didn’t regret it.

The dangerous thing about letting yourself try one new thing, Harvey thought—such as being in a relationship, or inviting friends over—was that if it went well, you tended to try *other* new things. Like entering the hedge maze at the Spirit’s Eve festival, knowing full well it scared the shit out of you, because you hoped maybe you could find the Golden Pumpkin and impress your boyfriend with it. Harvey found himself contemplating the nature of bravery while facing determinedly into a dead end of hedge, shivering from head to toe and cursing himself for having been such an idiot.

It wasn't that he *believed* in ghosts or spooks or any other bedtime stories designed to frighten children. It was just that his dumb mammalian id hadn’t gotten that memo. By the time he’d taken his third turn in the maze, his scalp was prickling uncomfortably and he felt a strong sensation of being watched. After having his ankle grabbed by a hand protruding from the ground, he’d fled in such terror he hadn’t even registered which way he was going. And that was how he’d ended up here, hyperventilating into the shrubbery, too frightened even to turn around and try to make his way back to the entrance.

He'd lost all sense of time—had he been standing there for ten minutes or an hour?—when footsteps from behind him sent him cowering against the leaves. Oh, Yoba, he couldn't turn around, it could be one of those skeletons of Marlon's, or maybe a giant spider like he'd heard rumors of, or—

Something touched his shoulder and he jumped a mile, whirling around in terror. When his eyes finally focused, he was equal parts mortified and relieved to see that it was just Charlie, hiding a laugh with his hand.

"Sorry I scared you, darlin'," he said, sounding slightly less than sincere. "What are you doing just standing in here?"

"Um. Waiting for you?" Harvey tried feebly. Charlie grinned, arching an eyebrow.

"Oh, yeah? And just how long have you been waiting?"

"A while," he admitted, face burning. Could he be *any* less impressive? Charlie was going to think he was a total wuss, and he wasn't even wrong. But Charlie just went up on tiptoe to kiss him, hand running down Harvey's arm to intertwine their fingers.

"Well. Sorry to keep you waiting." He squeezed Harvey's hand reassuringly. "Ready to move on?"

"Move on?" Harvey's heart kicked back into overdrive behind his ribs; surely Charlie didn't mean they were going to *stay* in the maze...did he?

"Well, yeah. That Golden Pumpkin isn't gonna find itself."

"Nobody's ever found it," Harvey said quickly, but Charlie just gave him a wicked grin.

"Until now," he declared, and set off back down the corridor, towing Harvey by the hand.

It was better than going it alone, to be sure, but not by much. Harvey devoutly wished the pair of them were back at the farm, far away from skeletons and disembodied hands. He'd just *had* to fall for an adventurous type, hadn't he? Still, the warmth of Charlie's palm pressed against his own kept the worst of the shivers at bay. They took a handful of turns, and after a while, Harvey noticed a pattern to them.

"We're only turning right," he observed.

"Yep. You'll always find your way out that way," Charlie explained, "though it won't be the fastest route. But I'm not in a hurry." Harvey begged to differ, though he saw the wisdom of Charlie's plan. After the next turn, Harvey gasped and tugged at Charlie's arm.

"Not that way," he begged. "There's these hands...they grabbed me before."

"Before you decided to wait for me?" Charlie asked knowingly, eyes twinkling. Harvey scowled, kicking at the dirt.

"Yes, *okay,* I may have been too scared," he said testily. "Can we skip it?"

Charlie frowned, craning his neck around the corner. “Sorry, V, but I think that’s the way through,” he said, and Harvey’s anxiety level soared to new heights. “Hey,” Charlie prompted gently, and Harvey met his eye; there was a warm expression on his face, and he gave Harvey’s hand a squeeze. “You know we don’t have to do this, right? We can turn around and leave.”

Harvey wanted to, he really did. Haunted mazes and their ilk were decidedly *not* his scene, and even the lure of the highly valuable Golden Pumpkin wasn't enough to help him overcome his terror. But Charlie was so brave, always venturing down into the mines and fighting off monsters. If Harvey couldn’t even stick it out through a silly festival maze, he really *was* pathetic. The need to save face in front of his boyfriend won out; he shook his head.

“I can do it. Let’s keep going.”

Charlie beamed at him, radiating pride, and Harvey was immediately glad he’d agreed to go on. “All right, then,” he said, “let’s go. Just stay close to me. They don’t look like they can reach that far.” Harvey clung a little tighter to Charlie’s hand, carefully following his footsteps down the hand-lined path.

True to Charlie’s word, the hands flexed and reached for them, but could never quite manage to grasp them. Fortunately, they only had to proceed halfway down the path before another turn presented itself, and they took it. A strange, flickering light shone ahead, and squinting through the darkness, Harvey saw a static-filled television at the end of the corridor.

“A TV?” he asked blankly as they approached it. “That’s an odd choice.”

“Yeah. Not particularly scar—AH!” Charlie’s bark of alarm coincided with a sharp spike in Harvey’s heart rate, because for the briefest split-second, something else had flashed on the screen—something Harvey couldn’t quite identify, but vaguely human-shaped. Though he didn’t consciously know what it was, it had filled him with dread. Blessedly, Charlie didn’t pull him any closer to the television, hastily turning right and hurrying into the next corridor.

“Fuckin’ freaky,” the farmer muttered under his breath, and Harvey felt a little better.

The next few turns passed uneventfully, just a series of bends in the hedge corridors. Eventually, they emerged into a large courtyard around the fountain, where Abigail stood cowering against the basin.

“You OK, Abby?” Charlie asked as they approached, and she shook her head tightly.

“Spiders,” she choked out, lifting a shaking hand to point down the path ahead. “I can’t go any further.”

“You can come with us,” Charlie said encouragingly, but she shook her head again, backing toward the direction they’d come from.

“Spiders are a deal-breaker. Thanks anyway. Good luck,” she called over her shoulder, and she was gone. Charlie and Harvey looked down the path and then at each other, and Harvey

was honestly a little pleased to see the discomfort on his features—he wasn't alone in his distaste for arachnids, then.

“When she said ‘spiders,’” Charlie began, and Harvey nodded.

“Big spiders. Not normal ones. Or so I’ve heard.”

“Welp.” Charlie swallowed, squeezing Harvey’s hand again—more for his own comfort than Harvey’s, for once—and sighed. “Better get on with it, then.”

It didn’t take long for the spiders to show up. A hairy leg appeared as they rounded a corner, and Harvey nearly leapt out of his skin at the size of it—as big around as a baseball bat, covered in stiff, black hairs. He and Charlie slowed to a crawl, shuffling forward inch by inch as more of it came into view. When at last the enormous body was revealed, Harvey bit back a cry. It was the size of a cow, with mandibles bigger than his head, and it wasn't alone; two slightly smaller ones flanked it, and tucked beneath a gigantic web in the corner, a pile of lurid orange eggs pulsated slightly. He saw the path through instantly: they would have to cross between the three spiders and under the web.

“Well, we gave it our best effort,” he said faintly, already turning to leave, but Charlie tugged at his hand. He turned to stare at him, eyes wide behind his glasses. “Charlie, you can’t be serious.”

“We’ve come this far,” Charlie replied, and if Harvey had been less terrified, the determination in his voice would have been a huge turn-on. In the current situation, though, it was mostly a huge inconvenience. He eyed the spiders, calculating. They couldn’t possibly be real, of course, but they *looked* it; they even seemed to breathe, their hairy sides expanding and contracting slowly. He turned to Charlie, whose gaze was still fixed on the path ahead.

“Why do you want this so badly?” he asked, genuinely curious. Charlie looked at him, raising one shoulder in a half-shrug.

“Nobody’s ever done it before,” he answered, as though it were obvious. Harvey sighed, running his free hand through his hair. There was *nothing* he wanted to do less than walk through that web—except disappoint Charlie.

“Lead the way,” he said, and the corner of Charlie’s mouth lifted in a grateful smile.

“Stay close.” They picked their way between the spiders, careful not to trod on any legs. To Harvey’s horror, the monsters’ eyes turned to follow their progress, but otherwise they made no other move. He kept an eye on the largest one as he stepped under the web; Charlie’s hand came up to press gently on the top of his head.

“Better duck,” he whispered, smirking. “You don’t want webs in your hair, giraffe man.”

It was horrible and tense, and the blood pounded in Harvey’s ears, but at last they put the spiders behind them. It was a mark of how terrifying the ordeal had been that Harvey was actually *glad* to see a graveyard looming ahead of them. Sam stomped through it toward them, looking mutinous.

“I got all the way through, and it’s just a dead end!” he fumed, throwing his hands up. “Nothing there! Could someone have beat me to it?”

“A dead end?” Harvey repeated blankly, as Sam stormed off. Charlie looked puzzled, but shook his head.

“Let’s see it for ourselves.” There was only one other opening from the graveyard, and they took it. Inside was a tiny, square clearing, nothing in sight but a wooden sign bearing a question mark. They stood in the middle, looking around with identical expressions of bewilderment.

“There was no other path,” Charlie insisted. “This has to be it.”

“We can look a bit more thoroughly.” For the first time all night, Harvey released Charlie’s hand, going to examine the sign. Maybe it had a clue on the back, or something attached to it? Over his shoulder, he saw Charlie walking the perimeter, dragging his fingers through the hedge. A mark on the wood caught his attention, and he leaned closer, but it seemed to be a garden-variety gouge.

“I don’t know, darlin’. It really just looks like a dea—AHH!” For the second time that night, Charlie’s sentence was interrupted by a shout of terror, and Harvey jolted upright. In the next instant, his blood ran cold: Charlie was nowhere to be seen.

“Charlie! CHARLIE!”

“I’m okay!” called a muffled voice, and Harvey spun wildly in a circle, looking for its source. The sight that met his eyes was so surreal, he took his glasses off and polished them hastily on his tie; a familiar callused hand protruded through a wall of solid hedge, passing through the branches and leaves as though it were made of mist. “This isn’t a real hedge, Harvey, it’s some kind of projection! Give me your hand, you can come through!”

Harvey did *not* want to come through, but neither did he want to be left alone while Charlie forged on to Yoba-knew-where. Tentatively, he reached out and placed his hand into Charlie’s, which was reassuringly warm and solid. With a sharp tug, he found himself pulled through the “hedge”—feeling absolutely nothing, Charlie was right—and into another small clearing surrounding a tree. This one, however, had an exit. Into a dark stone passageway, built right into the cliff.

“Well,” Charlie began, and Harvey shook his head vehemently.

“No.”

“But—”

“Nope.”

“Fine, fine,” Charlie sighed, raising his hands in surrender. “Just wait here, okay? I’ll go check it out.”

“But—wait— *Charlie!”* he hissed, as the farmer dropped his hand and strode away into the passage. Harvey stood rooted to the spot for a moment, agonized with indecision, before swearing under his breath and jogging to catch up with his (foolhardy, reckless, ridiculous) boyfriend.

The moment he entered the passage, the world went entirely dark. It was surreal: he could look back and see the torch-lit world outside, but none of the light permeated through the stone archway; it was like stepping into a void. “Charlie?” he whispered, shivering; he didn’t like this one bit, they should just cut their losses and go home, anything could be lurking in here—

“This is so weird,” came Charlie’s voice, so much closer than expected Harvey nearly screamed. He reached out, groping blindly, and at last his shaking fingers closed around something solid: Charlie’s forearm. “I tried using my flashlight, but it doesn’t work in here. We have to go through it in the dark, I guess.”

“We are *not* going through it in the dark,” Harvey insisted, already turning back toward the entrance. “We’re going to turn around and get out of...um...honey?”

“Yeah?”

“Where’s the entrance?”

They spun slowly in place, shuffling because Harvey refused to let go of Charlie’s arm, but it was no use: the entrance was just *gone.* “I haven’t moved! I saw it just a minute ago, and I haven’t moved at all! Where did it go?” Harvey demanded, hating how high and panicky his voice had gone.

“So weird,” Charlie breathed, loud in the oppressive silence. “I don’t see it.”

“What do we do now?” Harvey asked, hating that he already knew the answer. Sure enough, Charlie’s hand slid down his arm and gave his fingers a sympathetic squeeze.

“Let’s just pick a direction and start walking. It’s not like we’re sealed in here, it’s just a game.” Sensing Harvey’s tension, he added, “Whatever exit we come to, we’ll take it, okay? Even if it just leads us back out the way we came. I promise.”

Harvey sighed, but they didn’t really have any other choice, so he nodded. Realizing Charlie couldn’t see him, he said aloud, “Okay. Lead the way.”

Harvey wasn't sure which was worse: the scary thing you could see (like a cluster of giant spiders) or the scary thing you couldn’t. The tunnel was just dark, not especially threatening, but Harvey’s brain filled in all kinds of terrifying things lurking in the shadows. They moved with infinitesimal slowness, Charlie sliding one foot out in front of the other, than moving the other to catch up with it. One of his clammy hands still gripped Harvey’s, and Harvey thought the other was thrust out in front of him.

It seemed to take forever, but then his sense of time was completely scrambled. How could you sense its passage in a place with no light and no sound? Not for the first time, he

marveled at Charlie for his bravery; he was clearly uneasy, but kept them moving steadily along. “How are you not more scared right now?” he asked at last, and a chuckle floated back toward him out of the darkness.

“Oh, don’t get me wrong, I don’t want to move in here or anything,” Charlie assured him. “But honestly, it isn’t any worse than the mines. At least I pretty much assume there’s nothing really dangerous in here. Can’t say the same of the mines.”

“Yoba,” Harvey croaked, his mind suddenly flooded with images of Charlie being stalked by underground beasts. “Maybe don’t talk about the mines anymore.”

“I promise I’m careful. The last thing I want is—oh, look!” He didn’t have to tell Harvey what to look at, because it was obvious: a speck of light in the distance, growing larger as they walked toward it. They sped up their steps as much as they dared, still careful to move their feet across the ground and look out for obstructions, and eventually the speck widened into another stone archway—and *not* the one they’d come through to enter the tunnel. Harvey could see more hedge walls, a gap in between them, and through the gap...an ornate wooden chest.

“We did it!” Charlie shouted, breaking into a jog. “Come on!” Harvey stumbled along after him, still fearful of one last trap being sprung, but they burst through the archway and into this new clearing without incident. Unsettling red eyes blinked out at them from every few feet of hedge, but nothing made any move to attack them, and after the smothering darkness Harvey was honestly pleased to see *anything*.

They approached the chest, still hand-in-hand, and Charlie ran his free hand reverently over its glossy surface. “You want to do the honors?” he asked, not taking his eyes off the prize.

“Definitely not. You earned it. Go ahead.”

He was half-afraid they’d need some sort of key, but the latch sprung open at Charlie’s touch, and the lid swung back on ancient, creaky hinges. Inside, glittering as though it were lit from within, was the Golden Pumpkin.

“We did it,” Charlie repeated, reaching in to pull it from its satin nest. “Jesus, this thing’s heavy!” Harvey laughed, but hung back to let Charlie claim his victory; the farmer hoisted the pumpkin from the chest, its luminous glow bathing his face in gold. After admiring it for a long moment, he turned and held it out to Harvey, grinning.

“For you,” he said, and Harvey’s mouth dropped open.

“What? After everything you went through to get it? No way!”

“Everything *we* went through. And I didn’t get to win you a big stuffed bear at the fair,” he said, his smile softening and going a little crooked. “This is the next best thing. Take it, make the clinic look festive.”

Harvey took it, mostly because it looked heavy and Charlie had to be getting tired of holding it out; sure enough, it weighed so much he nearly dropped it. Was it actually *solid* gold?

“This is worth a lot more than a stuffed bear,” he protested.

“Okay, then sell it, and pay the clinic’s bills for a couple months. I know you give away treatment for free half the time, I’m not blind,” Charlie added, seeing Harvey’s mouth open in protest. Harvey’s shoulders slumped, and Charlie’s hand went to one of them. “It’s not a criticism, darlin’. You’ve got a big heart, and I love that about you.”

Harvey looked up, sure he was blushing; sure enough, Charlie was smirking at him in the way that meant he was being *adorable.* “I’ll put it on the counter,” he managed, and Charlie pulled him down for a kiss with a hand on the back of his neck.

“Good,” he declared. “Then let’s get out of here. Unless you want to stick around—that tunnel seems like a pretty solid place to make out.”

“Let’s save it for my apartment, I think.”

“Still scared?”

“No!”

“I’ll protect you. Just come a little bit closer, that’s it.”

“You’re incorrigible.”

“I really hope so.”

Chapter End Notes

This wasn't the plottiest chapter, I know, but it was a blast to write. These little vignettes are really fun for me; I hope you liked them too.

Tomorrow: Harvey gets busy, and not in the fun way. Maru educates Charlie about Winter Star. Charlie has a dinner date, but he's running really, really late...

Chapter 14: Winter, Year 1

Chapter Summary

> Harvey gets busy, and not in the fun way. Maru educates Charlie about Winter Star. Charlie has a dinner date, but he's running really, really late...

Chapter Notes

> CONTENT WARNING: This is probably the biggest one for the whole story, so heads up. This chapter deals a lot with Shane, and specifically with the events of his six-heart cutscene. If you've played his route, you most likely know what's coming. If you haven't, and you want to check whether this is something you want to read, feel free to skip ahead to the end-of-chapter notes--I'll put a summary in there. The potentially triggering content takes place after the row of bold asterisks, so if you prefer not to read it, you can safely stick with us until that point!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

> “For the last time, would you pay attention?” Shane snapped, bring Charlie back to Earth. He’d been staring off into space again, a thousand miles away from the chicken coop. Shane gave an indignant sigh and ducked back behind the new heater, doing something unintelligible with a wrench. “I don’t know how *I* ended up doing all the work. It’s your coop.”
>
> “Because you know what you’re doing, and I don’t?”
>
> “And you never will, staring at the ceiling. What were you thinking about, anyway?”
>
> The answer was something highly graphic and pleasant that Harvey had done to him the last time they’d spent the night together—a week ago—but he doubted Shane would appreciate the details. “You don’t wanna know.”
>
> “Ugh, you’re right, I don’t.” Shane emerged from behind the heater, gesturing with his wrench as the chickens flapped madly around his feet. “It’s in, should work fine. Keep an eye on it and if it isn’t heating up right, hit it with a wrench a couple times.”
>
> *“That* I can do.” Charlie bent down and scooped up Baby, who gave a cluck of approval as he stroked her glossy white feathers. “Gotta keep my girls warm. I can’t believe how fast the weather turned.”

“Yes. Amazing how it seems to get cold the same time every year.”

“Just out of curiosity, is there *any* chance I’ll say something that doesn’t annoy you today?” Charlie had meant it mostly as a joke, but he saw Shane stiffen out of the corner of his eye, and regretted it. Shane shoved his hands in his hoodie pockets and hunched his shoulders—a classic sign that he was unhappy, Charlie had learned by now.

“Hope so,” Shane muttered, but his usual bite was missing. He turned toward the door, and Charlie fished for something to say, something to clear the sudden thundercloud.

“Hey, you got that new RPG, right? What was it?”

“Blood Magic?”

“That’s it. Are you busy? Want to play?”

Shane made a noncommittal noise, his gaze fixed somewhere around Charlie’s knees. “It’s one-player.”

“That’s okay. I’ve got nothing better to do, if you don’t mind an audience.”

The walk to Marnie’s ranch was mostly a silent one, save their footsteps shuffling through the snow (and Bones plowing his own path, leaping joyously through the drifts). Winter had fallen on the Valley faster than Charlie had ever imagined, seemingly flipping from crunching leaves to crunching snow overnight. And with winter had come an absolute barrage of work for Harvey. Everyone in town seemed to have either a cold, the flu, or both, and he was trapped in the exam room from morning until evening. Then came the task of updating records and reordering their rapidly-dwindling supplies, which kept him busy sometimes until after midnight. He’d taken to sleeping in his apartment every night, and Charlie had only seen him when he stopped by to drop off food.

Normally, the changing of the seasons also meant a lot of work for Charlie, so he wouldn’t have minded so much. But winter was a different animal. There was nothing to occupy his time but the chickens, since he couldn’t grow any crops. The mine had potential, but he seemed to have reached a stretch of floors that were filled with ice, and he couldn’t quite bring himself to walk through the freezing cold for an hour for the privilege of hanging out in an ice cave. There also seemed to be a lot of walking, living skeletons down there lately, something which frankly scared him half to death, but which he hadn’t mentioned to Harvey. Somehow, he couldn’t imagine that conversation going well. He’d have taken any conversation with his boyfriend at this point, though—it was the most they’d been separated since that brief stint at the beginning of fall, and Charlie missed him like crazy.

The one upside to Charlie’s empty schedule was that Shane seemed to be in a similar boat. He still had his hours at Joja, of course, but only part-time, and they were usually in the morning while Charlie was still occupied with his handful of farm tasks. As a result, the two of them were spending most afternoons and sometimes evenings together. Shane came over and they hung out with the chickens, or met at the Stardrop to play arcade games, or went to Marnie’s ranch and played MegaStation there. It was nice to spend time with him again; Charlie had begun to realize that he’d gotten caught up in his new relationship and neglected

his friends a little. He resolved to keep up with Shane at least a few times a week once the winter was over.

Once they'd taken off damp coats and sodden boots in Marnie's foyer, Charlie headed to Shane's room while Shane beelined for the fridge. He'd just gotten to the *Blood Magic* menu screen when Shane reappeared, holding out a beer. Charlie took it, laughing.

"It's eleven A.M., Shane," he pointed out, and Shane shrugged as he pried off his cap.

"Not like we're in church or something," he said, and downed what looked like half the bottle in one long gulp. Charlie felt a twinge of unease, setting his still-sealed bottle aside as Shane started to play. He'd always known Shane loved drinking, but he'd thought of him as sort of a lovable boozehound, a kind of fixture at the village saloon. But during the last few weeks, he'd realized Shane wasn't having a few beers a couple nights a week. He was having a *lot* of beers, *every* night, and apparently some mornings, too.

Charlie thought about saying something. He thought he probably *should* say something, but where could he start? In his limited experience, mostly gleaned from trashy TV shows back in Zuzu City, people didn't generally take kindly to the suggestion that they had a drinking problem. Still: he was Shane's best friend. If anyone could start the conversation, it was him, right? He opened his mouth, still unsure of what he meant to say, and in that same moment Shane turned to grin at him. He'd just taken down some kind of grotesque monster, stabbing his sword into it in a Monty Python spray of blood, and the earlier shadows had been chased away from his face. For the first time all day, he looked relaxed and happy.

And damn it all, Charlie didn't have the heart to wipe the smile off his face.

"Taking notes, farm boy?"

"Oh, come on. My grandma could've beat that one."

"That was just the warm-up. *This* one, now…"

* * * * *

"You sure you wouldn't rather take a nap? Or go back to the house and stay warm?"

"I'm sure. I need you more than I need a nap, and if I set foot in your house I'll never make it back to the clinic."

"That doesn't sound so bad to me." Charlie bumped his arm against Harvey's above their clasped hands as they walked. Two sets of gloves kept them from being able to intertwine their fingers, but they did the best they could. They strolled side-by-side in the Secret Woods, which Charlie had suggested as the only place in town nobody could possibly bother them. Desperate to get away from the clinic for an hour, Harvey had eagerly accepted. He was a little thrown, though, by the dagger Charlie had tucked into his belt. According to the farmer's explanation, a few slimes had moved in last time he'd visited the woods, and he wanted to be prepared. Ultimately, slimes were a small price to pay for a bit of privacy, Harvey decided.

He stole a glance at his boyfriend, whose nose and cheeks were lit up pink with cold. Charlie looked utterly content, occasionally squeezing Harvey's hand or tugging him down by his scarf for a quick peck. God, Harvey had missed him. They were a week and a half into winter, and they'd barely spent two hours together the whole month. He missed Charlie's laugh, his smile, his kisses, even his dog. To say nothing of the sex: Harvey had gone six years without it, but now that he had near-daily access again, ten days felt like an unbearable drought.

The minute he had a free afternoon, he was going to drag Charlie to bed and pin him there for *hours.*

That was a dangerous train of thought; he'd already rejected the idea of sneaking off to the farm for a quickie. After so long, he knew he wouldn't be satisfied with what they could do in thirty minutes. To distract himself, he asked, "What have you been up to the last few days?"

"Nothing that interesting, really. Shane came over and helped me install that new heater for the girls. They seem a lot happier now. Oh, and then we beat that *Blood Magic* game. Well, he beat it. I mostly just watched and kind of heckled him."

"A valuable service," Harvey said, doing his best to sound wry and amused. In truth, his stomach had taken a little drop, as it seemed prone to doing these days. He'd lost count of how many times Charlie had mentioned Shane in the brief moments they'd spent together lately. As casually as he could manage, he asked, "You two have been spending a lot of time together, haven't you?"

"Oh, yeah. It's been nice, actually. Pretty convenient that his schedule lines up so well with mine."

Convenient, indeed, Harvey thought, and then instantly felt awful. Why couldn't he get his jealousy under control? He *knew* Shane and Charlie were just friends, and he couldn't fault Charlie for finding someone else to occupy his time while Harvey was buried in work. He resolutely fought down the hateful little voice inside him, the one that reminded him how Philip had spent time with his "friends" when Harvey was busy, too.

Shut up, shut up, shut up. Not Charlie. Charlie wouldn't do that to him. Charlie had, in fact, punched Philip for doing that to Harvey.

...Well, damn. Harvey's thoughts had turned sexual again. Still, at least he wasn't focused on his jealousy anymore.

"Harvey?" The shift in tone of Charlie's voice instantly brought him back to attention, and he glanced over again; Charlie looked uneasy, worrying his lower lip with his teeth. "Have you ever had a patient who was...an alcoholic?"

Oh. Harvey knew where this was going, of course he did. In truth, he'd been wondering when Charlie would see it. Still: doctor-patient confidentiality mattered to him, and he had to tread lightly. "I...have some experience with it, yes."

“Dumb question. I forgot you’re Pam’s doctor.”

Harvey hummed, smiling ruefully, and Charlie waved a hand at him. “Sorry. I know you can’t talk about it. I just wondered what the, I guess *signs*, were. What to look out for.”

Harvey cleared his throat, organizing his thoughts. “Well. Frequent binge drinking is a solid sign, but not a definitive diagnosis in itself. Drinking at inappropriate times, being defensive or evasive about it, drinking alone regularly. All of these can be cause for concern.” He paused, hoping Charlie wouldn’t clam up at his next question. “Are you worried about someone?”

Charlie glanced at him out of the corner of his eye, a brow raised. “I think you can probably guess.”

“Well...yes. You’re not the only one with concerns.”

Charlie sighed, rubbing a gloved hand over the back of his neck. “Shit. What can we do?”

“That depends.” Harvey turned to face him, taking Charlie’s hands in his own. “If you spoke to him—gently—do you think he’d listen to you?”

“Honestly? Probably not.” He drew a breath, looking up at Harvey through the curls poking out of his hat, and let it back out. “I should try anyway, though, huh?”

“I can’t tell you what to do. He may get very defensive, or brush it off. But it also might save his life.” Charlie nodded glumly, and Harvey couldn’t resist reaching to brush his hair out of his eyes. “Listen. Knowing that someone cares, *really* cares, can make all the difference. You’re a good friend to him, honey. I believe he’ll come around. Eventually.”

Harvey didn’t add the rest of his thoughts: that in his opinion, Shane was clinically depressed, and it was difficult to know whether the depression or alcoholism had come first; that getting treatment for one almost certainly wouldn’t be effective without treatment for the other; and that only a real desire to get better could start him down the path. That was a discussion for another day, and really, not Harvey’s story to discuss.

Charlie caught Harvey’s hand, lifting it to his lips and pressing a kiss to the leather of his glove. “Thank you,” he murmured, his mouth tilting up at one corner. They resumed walking, hands dropping to entwine at their sides once more, and all at once Charlie seemed to brighten.

“On a very different note,” he began, a sly tone to his voice that intrigued Harvey immediately, “Marnie cornered me today and asked me what I was getting a certain someone for his *birthday.”*

“Oh, Yoba,” Harvey groaned, laughing. “Am I in trouble?”

“Of course not. But why didn’t you tell me? It’s in two weeks!”

Harvey’s face flushed; he hoped Charlie would assume it was from the cold. “I don’t know,” he hedged. “We haven’t been together that long, and birthdays can be a lot of pressure. I

didn't want you to go to any trouble, I guess."

"Oh, but I want to. I'm gonna go to *tons* of trouble, and you can't stop me."

Harvey's instinct was to argue, to stammer out his insistence that he didn't need any fuss, but in truth Charlie's words had lit a little ember of excitement in his chest. His birthdays had more or less always been just another day on the calendar, but perhaps they meant something more to Charlie. Curiosity won the battle over politeness, hands down. "I wouldn't dare try," he assured him, fighting back a grin. Something occurred to him, and he looked over at Charlie in alarm. "Wait! When's *your* birthday? Did I miss it?"

Charlie laughed, swinging their joined hands. "Well, kind of, but don't feel bad—I did too," he said, and Harvey's brow furrowed in confusion. "It was two days after I moved here," he clarified. "I worked on the farm all day, got some dinner from Gus, and didn't even think about the date until I was almost asleep that night."

"Charlie! I'm so sorry!"

"Oh, darlin', don't worry. We barely even knew each other then."

That didn't stop me from thinking about you all the time, Harvey thought, but kept to himself. "I'll make it up to you in a few months," Harvey promised, and Charlie stopped walking again, wrapping Harvey's scarf around his hand. His eyes gleamed in that way that made Harvey's face heat and his insides curl, and he tugged Harvey down until he could lean their foreheads together.

"I'm sure you will," he murmured, and then both of their mouths were too busy to speak for a long time.

* * * * *

"So it's basically like Christmas," Charlie said. Maru finished her swallow of beer with a little half-shrug, setting the glass down on the bar.

"I mean, pretty much, from what I understand. There's no real religious component to the Feast of the Winter Star, though. It's just about getting together with your family and eating a bunch of food. And giving presents to your 'secret friend.'"

"That's the most euphemistic-sounding name I've ever heard."

Maru snorted. "Yeah, I think Lewis came up with it."

"Oh, so we're all just giving presents to Marnie, then?" They dissolved into furtive laughter, Gus smiling at them curiously from the other end of the bar. When they subsided, Charlie pushed his empty glass away, signaling Gus for another.

"I'm glad you could still come out tonight." He glanced at the door to the saloon, but it remained stubbornly shut, no matter how many times he looked at it. "Gotta say it feels weird, though, being just across the square without him here."

“I know,” Maru acknowledged. She leaned forward, a sympathetic look on her face. “I think he’s still figuring out how to balance being a good doctor *and* a good boyfriend. He’s never had to do both at once before. At least, not since he’s lived here.” She took another drink, sitting back on her stool. “Go easy on him, okay? I know it’s hard when he’s this busy.”

“It’s not his fault,” Charlie assured her, and that was true. He couldn’t help pining just a little bit—for one thing, the holiday season was starting to get into swing, and all the romantic twinkly ambience was really making him maudlin—but he wasn’t upset with Harvey, at all. Tonight, he’d finally thought he would have a break in his barrage of patients, and he’d offered to take Charlie and Maru out for a drink to celebrate. But then Evelyn had come in with a blistering fever just before closing time, and Harvey hadn’t been willing to send her home in the snow. So she was dozing in the OR while Harvey gave her fluids and fever reducers, and at his insistence, Maru and Charlie were out on their own. He’d been a little disappointed, but his time with Maru had been just as scarce lately, and anyway: how were you going to be mad at your boyfriend for canceling a date to care for a sick old lady? If anything, it made Charlie love him even more.

“While we’re on the subject,” Charlie added, thinking back to Maru’s line about *since he’s lived here,* “how did you and Harvey actually meet? You must have been, what, eighteen?”

“Nineteen,” she corrected him, as Gus dropped off their second round. “We hadn’t had a doctor for a few months, not since our last one passed away. It seemed like Harvey just showed up overnight, and he was so busy I didn’t even set eyes on him until my appointment a few weeks later. I remember I was shocked at how *young* he was. I’d literally only ever seen one doctor before, and he was in his sixties by the time I was born. Harvey was only a little over thirty.”

“And you started working for him then?”

“No, not for about a year or so. It was just paperwork in the beginning, I was only going to be an office assistant. But Harvey figured out that I was smart and said it was a waste of my brain to have me just filing stuff all day, so I started helping with tests, samples, that kind of thing. I don’t usually touch patients unless it’s an emergency since I’m not actually certified, but it’s not like anyone in town is going to report me.”

Charlie thought about twenty-year-old Maru for a moment, watching thirty-three-year-old Harvey as he explained how to perform some kind of medical test. It warmed his heart a little, knowing that the two town geeks had found each other. “Were you always planning on going into medicine?”

“Oh, no. I’m still not, actually.”

“No?” Charlie was surprised; he knew Maru was a genius, but he’d assumed she was planning on going to medical school, since she’d spent so many years working at the clinic. “What do you want to do?”

“Did my dad put you up to this?” She rolled her eyes good-naturedly, taking another drink of her beer. “I want to invent. Robotics, specifically.”

“You build *robots?”*

“I do. Maybe if you’re really good, I’ll let you see one sometime,” she added, winking.

“Will you go to school for that?”

She sighed, and Charlie felt bad; it was apparently a topic she didn’t much care for. Before he could change the subject, she shrugged. “I think so. Eventually. I just...I like my life here, and I still feel like I have more to learn on my own. I’ll go someday. Anyway, Harvey’s hopeless without me.”

Charlie thought Harvey would probably fire Maru himself if he thought he was holding her back, but he suspected that was just an excuse, and decided to accept the change of direction. “What was he like back then? When you first got to know him?”

Maru glanced up at him and then away, her smile turning rueful. “I don’t think you really want to know.”

“No, I do.”

She sighed, pulling her beer toward her again. “Honestly? Just...sad. Really sad. It was obvious he’d been through something, but it took him almost *two years* and a whole bottle of wine to open up enough to tell me about Philip.”

Charlie couldn’t imagine it—trying to get through a Defcon 1 breakup without a single person to confide in about it. “Jesus.”

“Yeah.” She fidgeted with her beer mat, then fixed him with what he thought was probably meant to be a glare. “Listen, I uh, probably should have done this a while ago, but—I don’t want to see him that sad ever again, okay? Don’t hurt him.”

Charlie stared at her in disbelief, then burst out laughing. “Oh my god, is this *The Talk?* Are you *threatening* me?”

“Hey! I build robots, remember? I’ll sic my android army on your ass.”

He could barely speak through his laughter, but finally he got himself together enough to get a few words out. “Maru,” he managed, wiping his eyes, “I’m glad he has you for a friend.” He rested his hand over hers on the bar, smiling. “You don’t have anything to worry about, okay? I’m crazy about him. I’ve never been so happy in my life.”

Maru looked mollified, her cheeks tinting a little above her answering smile. “Good,” she said simply, and turned her hand over to squeeze Charlie’s before pulling it away.

Charlie settled back with his beer, still grinning like an idiot. “So. Tell me more about this Winter Star party. Is there mistletoe?”

* *

Finally, *finally,* the last stragglers of the flu outbreak got well enough not to need Harvey's attention, even Evelyn, who went home after two nights under observation. The first day they went without a single patient, Harvey left Maru in charge of the clinic and went to Pierre's for some groceries. He wanted to cook dinner for Charlie, who had been endlessly patient with him, and then drag him to bed and keep him there until the sun rose. When Charlie dropped by for his afternoon visit, Harvey asked him to come by at seven that night for a surprise, and Charlie agreed with obvious enthusiasm. Now, dinner had been cooked (lasagna, one of the few things Harvey knew he could do really well), wine had been opened to breathe, candles had been lit, his apartment had been scrubbed, and Ray Charles was playing on his turntable. There was only one problem.

Charlie was late.

Really late, forty-five minutes late, which was totally unlike Charlie. Harvey had put the lasagna back into the warm oven twenty minutes ago, and was now mostly sitting around, growing increasingly worried. He considered starting on the wine, but if and when Charlie finally showed up, he didn't want to be drunk. Unfortunately, Harvey was left in the company of his worst enemy—his own stupid brain—and had started down the rabbit hole of catastrophe scenarios. There were the usual mining incidents, trees falling in the wrong direction, and ice fishing mishaps, but now there was one he hadn't been able to banish from his mind since it had first appeared: the tiny, persistent thought that perhaps Charlie was occupied with someone else.

"Stop it, *stop,"* he said to his empty apartment, hands over his face, and then instantly felt like a crazy person. Charlie was *not* fooling around on him, he knew that. There was a perfectly sound reason why he was late, and in all likelihood it was a simple one: he'd fallen asleep, gotten engrossed in a book and lost track of time, or something along those lines. Any minute now, he'd come barreling up the stairs, breathless with apologies and satisfactory explanations.

"Sorry I'm late, lover boy," Philip had said, "traffic was horrible," and then he'd turned his head and Harvey had seen the mark, livid red against the skin of his neck—

"He. Is. Not. Like. That," Harvey ground out through his teeth, and decided to go ahead and pour himself just *one* glass of wine. Cabernet in hand, he wandered to the window for the fifteenth time, gazing down into the snowy square and willing Charlie to appear. After a few moments of aimlessly watching the flakes, something did, but it couldn't be Charlie. It was a taller and bulkier figure—but why was it lurching like that? The snow was barely five inches deep, not enough to seriously impede walking. And why were its legs so skinny compared to its upper half? Harvey took off his glasses, cleaned them, replaced them on his face, and squinted hard at the approaching figure.

And then dropped his glass and sprinted out of his apartment, leaving all the doors flung open behind him.

He reached the front door before the lurching figure did, dashing out into the snow without his coat, and now he could see clearly what he thought he'd made out upstairs: Charlie, staggering through the snow with the dead weight of an unconscious Shane draped across his back. Shane was tall enough that the tips of his shoes dragged through the snow, and Charlie

had clearly been carrying him for some time, sweat plastering his curls to his forehead even in the frigid weather. Harvey rushed forward to help him, seizing one of Shane's arms and transferring it to his own shoulders.

"Harvey, I'm sorry, I'm so sorry," Charlie panted, adjusting the weight more evenly. "I was—he just—"

"Don't try to talk, Charlie, let's get him inside." Shane was alarmingly cold and pallid, dressed only in a sodden hoodie and jeans, but now that Harvey was closer he could hear the shallow, harsh breaths coming from his lungs. They managed to wrestle him through the door and into the OR, and as soon as they deposited him onto one of the beds, Charlie sank to the floor like a marionette whose strings had been cut. Harvey started toward him in alarm, but Charlie held up a hand, breathing heavily.

"I'm...okay. Just...out of breath."

Harvey took him at his word, turning his attention back to Shane. The man was unconscious, but still breathing. Harvey turned him onto his side; he had a feeling he knew what was wrong with Shane, and didn't want anyone aspirating their own vomit tonight.

"What happened?"

Charlie took a few deep breaths, leaning back against the side of the bed. "I was ice fishing, on the pond near the southern cliffs," he managed, pressing his hand to an apparent stitch in his side. "I heard a noise and went into the trees, and I found him there, drunk and rolling around on the edge of the cliff."

"Yoba," Harvey breathed, his stomach plummeting. Those cliffs were *high;* Shane could easily have rolled over the edge. He got to work, trying to strip Shane's soaking hoodie while checking his pulse. "Unconscious?"

Charlie turned to look at him for the first time, and his face crumpled into a stricken expression. "No," he whispered, and Harvey was alarmed to see tears brimming in his eyes. "He was...he talked about...I think he went there to kill himself," he finally got out, his voice catching.

This was hard, the trickiest balancing act Harvey had ever done, because he needed to treat Shane while every cell in his body cried out to comfort Charlie. In the short term, he settled for reaching down and pressing his free hand to Charlie's cheek, locking eyes with him for a moment while he counted Shane's heartbeats.

"I'm so sorry, honey," he said, as gently as he could. "We're going to talk about that, I promise, but right now we have to help him. Okay?"

"Okay," Charlie whispered, eyes to the floor. Harvey couldn't take it.

"Hey. Look at me." Charlie did, a tear escaping down his face, and Harvey pressed, "He is not going to die. All right? You did so well, bringing him here. I've got him now."

“Okay.”

Harvey hated to do it, but he had to get himself in the doctor mindset if he wanted to save Shane’s life, and so he turned away from the heartbreaking sight of his boyfriend crying on the floor. Shane had an alarming blue tinge to his lips, but it appeared to be from cold, not lack of oxygen. Harvey continued stripping him; the cold from his soggy clothes was putting him in danger of serious shock. After a moment, Charlie got unsteadily to his feet, reaching out silently to help. Together, they got Shane’s jeans and T-shirt off, and Harvey gestured to the cabinet behind him. “Can you grab two blankets out of there?”

By the time they got him swaddled in blankets, Shane was beginning to stir slightly. Harvey had put on gloves, hung a warmed banana bag and prepared an IV needle, but there was something else that had to happen first—something that was either going to be unpleasant or *extremely* unpleasant, depending on how much Shane could help.

“Any idea how much he drank?” Harvey asked, hooking up a heart monitor. “Or when he stopped?”

“He had an empty six-pack with him, but I don’t know if that’s all he drank. He was still finishing the last one when I got there.”

“This looks like more than a six-pack to me,” Harvey said, right as Shane let out a groan. “Shane, can you hear me?”

“Muhhh,” Shane replied.

“Good enough.” Harvey grabbed the nearest trash can and pulled it to the side of the bed, and tried to roll Shane partially into a sitting position; all at once, Shane’s body heaved, and he vomited spectacularly. It mostly went into the can, at least. Harvey waited, holding Shane’s upper body into a safe position, as he emptied the contents of his stomach over the next long minutes.

“Jesus, I didn’t think someone could have that much in them,” Charlie said, looking vaguely nauseated himself. Harvey had stopped being fazed by vomit years ago, but even he had to admit the smell in the room left something to be desired.

“At least we won’t have to pump him.” When it seemed that Shane really was done, Harvey settled him back onto his side, depositing an emesis basin in front of his face. He busied himself with the IV, taping it securely into Shane’s elbow and checking to make sure the drip had started. The heart monitor showed a slow but regular pulse, and all in all, Harvey thought things could have been a lot worse. Physically, anyway.

“Charlie?” Shane mumbled, his eyes cracked barely open. “Is he…”

“I’m here,” Charlie said, moving around the bed so Shane could see him. He looked close to tears again, but managed to hold them in. Harvey longed to put an arm around him, but he was still wearing gloves and he wasn’t sure they were free of fluids, so he settled for standing very close. “So are you. We’re at the clinic.”

“How?” Shane managed, and Harvey understood the question.

“Charlie carried you,” he said, glancing over at his boyfriend. “You were very lucky he was able to bring you all the way here.”

“Lucky,” Shane sighed—agreement or argument, Harvey wasn’t sure—and closed his eyes again. Charlie looked alarmed, but Harvey shook his head.

“It’s all right. He’ll most likely come in and out of consciousness for a while. He’s getting fluids and electrolytes from the bag, and I’m monitoring his vitals.” He moved to the sink, stripped his gloves into the trash, and began scrubbing his hands. He was desperate to touch Charlie, to reassure himself that he was really all right. “He’ll have a ferocious hangover, probably, but he’ll be okay.”

Charlie just nodded, looking lost, and as soon as Harvey had dry hands he led him to the other bed. He drew the curtain between their bed and Shane’s, sitting down beside Charlie and taking both of his hands in his own.

“Honey,” he said gently, “what happened?”

Charlie took a huge, shuddering breath, and then the story poured out of him: Shane at the edge of the cliff, wondering aloud why he shouldn’t end it all; Charlie desperately reassuring him that he was loved and had reasons to live; Shane agreeing, ultimately, to get up and move away from the ledge; Charlie catching him when he passed out, and alternately dragging and carrying his semiconscious form the rest of the way back to the square. At the end of this speech, Charlie raised his eyes to Harvey’s face, red-rimmed and painful-looking.

“I think...if I wasn’t there...I think he would have done it,” Charlie whispered, the tortured expression back on his face. Harvey reached out as gently as he could, drawing him into his arms and pressing a kiss into his hair.

“But you were,” he whispered, “and he didn’t.” He held Charlie, rocking him gently as he dissolved into tears at last.

* * * * *

Charlie jolted awake, pulled from sleep by the thought that there was something urgent he was supposed to be doing, and stared blearily at the ceiling in confusion. The paint was the wrong color, the light slanting into the room from the wrong direction—where *was* he?

All at once, the events of last night clicked back into place, and he sat up. He was in Harvey’s apartment, alone in his bed; Harvey had insisted he get some sleep, while the doctor stayed behind to monitor Shane. Every muscle in Charlie’s body screamed in protest; carrying Shane’s stocky body through the snow had taken every ounce of strength he had. As Charlie climbed gingerly out of bed and pulled his pants back on, he looked around the apartment for the first time since he’d arrived. His heart sank as his eyes landed on the table: it was set for a romantic dinner, a bottle of wine long forgotten and candles burned down to stubs. Clearly, Harvey had been in the mood to celebrate, and the evening hadn’t turned out to be very celebratory.

Yet again, Charlie felt the odd mixture of anger, sadness, relief, and guilt he'd been grappling with since last night. He was angry with Shane for wanting to throw his life away; he was relieved he hadn't. He felt guilty for not having gotten up the courage to speak to Shane about his alcohol abuse, and for not having noticed how close he was to the (literal and figurative) edge; he felt sad that Shane had felt so alone. In the absence of anything more productive to do, Charlie swished some mouthwash, ran his fingers through his hair, and headed down to the clinic. As he reached the OR door, he heard voices from inside, and paused outside to listen.

"...you feeling?" came Harvey's voice.

"I've had better mornings," Shane answered, sounding rough and gravelly. There was silence for a moment, presumably while Harvey checked his vitals or did some other medical thing, Charlie thought.

"Let's go ahead and get the lecture over with," Shane continued, and Charlie felt a hot surge of anger. Was he *really* going to stick with the apathetic routine *today?*

"I'm not going to lecture you," Harvey replied. He sounded so tired; Charlie wondered if he'd been sitting awake all night.

"Why not?"

"Do you think it would help?" Shane didn't respond, and Harvey continued. "Either you regret what happened last night and want to get better, or you *don't* want to get better and you're just waiting for me to stop talking so you can go. I doubt my droning on at you about the dangers of alcohol and the beauty of life would make a difference, and judging by the look on your face, I think someone has already tried that." More silence, and then Harvey asked more gently, "So which is it?"

There was such a long pause, Charlie wondered if Shane had fallen back asleep. At last, he responded, "I want to get better." Charlie felt a powerful wave of relief; he pressed a hand to his chest, which felt suddenly constricted.

"Good. We can work with that."

Shane made a noise of assent, and Harvey continued. "I know a very good counselor in Zuzu City, someone I knew from medical school. I can give her a call today and get you an appointment, if you're all right with that."

"Okay. Sure."

Harvey paused, and Charlie could tell he was about to say something he thought Shane wouldn't like. "I really think you should consider at least a brief stay in inpatient rehab," he said gently. "Addiction withdrawals can be very difficult. This will be easier if you're in a place with qualified staff who can care for you."

Shane sighed. "I'll think about it," he said at last, and Harvey didn't push. Charlie heard the sounds of Harvey bustling around cleaning, and he was just about to enter the room when he

heard his own name. “I don’t know what I’m going to say to Charlie,” Shane said.

“Are you worried about that?”

“He’s going to be so mad at me.”

“Maybe.” Charlie felt the guilt again, even as he *did* feel angry. “He may feel all kinds of things. But primarily, he’s going to be glad you’re alive.”

“Did he really carry me here by himself?”

“He did.”

“Shit.”

Yeah, Charlie thought grimly, rolling his sore shoulders.

“Yes,” Harvey said simply.

“That’s a *long* way to drag somebody who eats as much pizza as I do. I...I can’t believe he did that for me.”

“You can’t?” Harvey prodded gently, and Shane was silent. “I can. He cares for you very much, Shane.” There was a brief pause, and Harvey continued, “And he’s not the only one. Try to remember that, won’t you?”

“I...yeah. Okay.”

Charlie decided he’d been lurking outside the doorway long enough, and came inside at last. His first observation was that Shane looked like shit: his eyes were painfully bloodshot, his skin faintly green, and he looked strangely vulnerable, wrapped in nothing but blankets. Turning his head, Charlie saw that Harvey looked almost as bad himself. He clearly hadn’t slept, his hair sticking up oddly and dark circles standing out under his eyes. He’d lost the tie, but still wore last night’s rumpled shirt and pants. The moment this was over, Charlie was going to shove him into bed and stand guard outside his door until he’d gotten at least twelve hours of sleep.

“Charlie,” Harvey greeted him, still looking pleased to see him beneath the layers of exhaustion. “Good morning. Did you sleep?”

“More than either of you, looks like,” Charlie replied, and Harvey tilted his head in acknowledgement. He glanced over at Shane, and saw that he was carefully looking everywhere except at Charlie. “Hey. How you feeling?”

Shane looked up at him then, clearly apprehensive, and seemed to fish around for an appropriate response. “Okay,” he said at last, his voice hoarse from vomiting. “Thanks to you, I guess.” He cleared his throat, wincing. “I owe you one.”

“It’s...fine.”

“No, it isn’t.”

“No, it isn’t,” Harvey agreed, and Charlie looked at him in surprise. “But that doesn’t mean it can’t ever be again. With therapy and time, maybe medication, and the right support, you can get through this, Shane.”

Charlie felt a lump come to his throat again. Good lord, was he ever going to pull himself together? “He’s right,” he managed at last. “And I’ll help you any way I can.”

Shane looked shocked. “You’re not mad? I thought…”

Charlie struggled with himself. What was the right thing to say? He didn’t want to outright lie, but he also didn’t want to send Shane down a spiral again. He sat heavily on the edge of the bed, organizing his thoughts. “I’m...sad,” he said at last, realizing the truth of the words as he said them. His anger was really just fear and sadness, combining into something else in his head. “I wish you’d told me how you were feeling. How bad it was. But I knew you were drinking too much, and I didn’t say anything. So I’m upset with myself, too.”

“Don’t be,” Shane said quickly, leaning forward. “It’s not your fault.”

“I know. I do.” Charlie let out a long, shaky breath, letting a hand settle on Shane’s ankle over the blanket. “I just wish I’d tried harder to help. But...I’ll do better, going forward. I’ll speak up if I see you hurting yourself.” He fixed Shane with a long gaze, willing him to really listen to his next words. “But you’ve gotta tell me if you’re hurting, too, okay? Or tell a therapist, or Harvey, or *somebody.* You don’t have to go it alone.”

Shane nodded wordlessly, but he held Charlie’s gaze, and Charlie knew he’d understood. At last, Shane looked over at Harvey, hitching the blankets up around himself a little higher. “When can I go home?” he asked. “Marnie’s probably starting to worry.”

“You can go whenever you feel up to it,” Harvey said, “but I think someone should walk you home.”

“I’ll do it,” Charlie volunteered, but a voice piped up from the doorway.

“Charlie.” When he looked over, Maru was beckoning toward him, dressed in a coat and leggings rather than her nurse’s uniform. He excused himself and stepped out with her, curious.

“Isn’t it your day off?”

“Yeah, it is. But Harvey got a message to me last night about Shane, and I knew he’d be up all night with him.” She glanced around Charlie at the two men in the OR, shaking her head. “He’s already exhausted from the flu outbreak and watching Evelyn, he needs to rest. Help him, would you?”

“I will, but I have to walk Shane home first,” Charlie protested. “He shouldn’t be by himself —”

“I’ll walk Shane,” she said firmly, “and then I’ll come back and watch the clinic. *You* take Harvey upstairs and get some food in him and put him to bed. Okay? He needs you.”

Overcome with gratitude, Charlie reached out and hugged Maru to him. It probably went on a little longer than was strictly normal, but all of Charlie’s emotions felt close to the surface and he didn’t know how to push them back down. Maru patted his back indulgently for a long moment before gently extracting herself, marching into the room.

“Change of plans,” she announced, beginning to pull the curtain around. “Shane, you get dressed, I’m taking you home. Harvey, go to bed.”

“But—” Harvey protested, and Maru turned toward him. Charlie couldn’t see her face, but at the sight of whatever expression she wore, Harvey surrendered.

“Let me at least get the paperwork together,” he said.

At long last, Charlie and Harvey were alone in the doctor’s apartment. It wasn’t exactly the way Charlie had imagined they’d spend their first day back together in weeks, but it was a start. Harvey stood just inside the front door, swaying on his feet as though he might fall asleep at any moment. Charlie went to him, eyes on his face.

“You don’t look so good, darlin’,” he said sympathetically, reaching up to brush a lock of hair out of Harvey’s eyes. Harvey leaned into the touch, catching Charlie’s hand and trapping it against his face with a wan smile.

“I’m all right. Just a little tired.”

“Are you hungry?”

Harvey shook his head. “I probably should be, but no. I just want to get some sleep.” He sniffed at his shirt, grimacing. “After a shower, maybe.”

Without another word, Charlie towed him into the bathroom by the hand. He started the hot water and then returned to Harvey, removing his glasses and unbuttoning his wrinkled shirt with gentle fingers. Dropping to a crouch, he helped Harvey step out of his pants and underwear, then stood back up to quickly shed his own clothes. When they were both naked, he guided Harvey into the shower and under the hot spray. Harvey tilted his head back, humming gratefully, and Charlie stepped close to support him under the water.

It was one of the most intimate moments they’d ever shared, and despite their nudity and proximity, neither one was hard. It wasn’t sexual, this closeness; he needed to be near Harvey and knew that Harvey needed him, and that was all. Squeezing shampoo into his palm, he reached up and massaged his hands through Harvey’s hair, lathering and rinsing it. He worked in the conditioner next, then washed the rest of his body, fighting against the ache in his own muscles. There would be time to deal with them later; Harvey’s need was more urgent. At any rate, taking care of Harvey let him put off thinking about his own muddled feelings for a little while longer.

When they were both clean, he pulled Harvey close and just held him for several minutes, letting the water beat down on them both. Harvey wrapped his long arms around Charlie's shoulders and rested his cheek on the top of Charlie's shorter head. They stood in the spray until Charlie worried Harvey really would fall asleep on his feet, and then he reluctantly shut off the water. He bundled Harvey into a large towel, rubbing a second one over his hair and face, before drying himself. The look Harvey gave him was so sweetly adoring, so full of trust and warmth, it nearly melted Charlie's heart.

"I should be helping *you,"* Harvey protested half-heartedly as Charlie finished drying off. "You've been through a lot in the last twelve hours."

"You did help me. You watched over him all night." Finally clean and dry, he went up on his tiptoes to kiss Harvey, soft and lingering. "Anyway, you haven't had a real rest in weeks. It's time we fixed that."

Harvey stopped arguing then, and Charlie steered his towel-swaddled body into the main room of the apartment. He rifled through Harvey's drawers as the doctor stood, looking half-asleep already. When he'd located a clean T-shirt and underwear, he helped Harvey into them, taking a moment to smooth his hands down his sides. Even through the cotton of the T-shirt, he could feel the slight protrusion of his boyfriend's ribs.

"When you wake up, I'm making you something loaded with butter and carbs," Charlie promised, giving him a gentle push toward the bed. "You haven't been eating enough."

"No," Harvey agreed, thumping face-down into the mattress. "Tried...made la—lasagna," he managed, through a cavernous yawn. "Bad timing."

Charlie's heart gave a little throb of guilt over Harvey's ruined dinner. "Soon," he whispered, tugging the blankets out from under Harvey's boneless form. "I'll help next time, okay?"

Harvey seemed to already be asleep, his breathing slow and even. Charlie smoothed a hand affectionately over his damp hair, then leaned over to place a kiss at the nape of his neck. But as he stood, Harvey's hand reached out and caught him by the wrist, surprisingly nimbly for someone so exhausted.

"Stay," he murmured, barely audible. "Know you just got up...but...please?"

"Of course, baby," Charlie whispered back, stroking a hand soothingly up Harvey's arm. "Hang on." He located a shirt and boxers for himself in Harvey's wardrobe—a little big on him, but they would do—and slipped under the covers beside Harvey. The bed was too small for two grown men to lie side-by-side, but it was plenty large for spooning. He curled himself over Harvey's back, wrapping an arm protectively around his middle, and felt the doctor's answering sigh of contentment warm him all the way to his bones.

Charlie felt the usual pull of his responsibilities; he would have to extract himself eventually. The animals had to be cared for, and he hadn't had time to ask anyone else to help. But Harvey's pull was stronger. For the moment, he wanted nothing more than to lie here, warm and comfortable, secure in the arms of a man who needed him.

Chapter End Notes

Content summary: Harvey worries because Charlie is very late for dinner, the first night he has room on his appointment schedule. Charlie arrives nearly an hour late, carrying an unconscious Shane. They get him into the clinic, and Charlie explains that he was ice fishing in the forest when he found Shane rolling on the edge of a cliff, drunk and contemplating suicide. Charlie managed to talk him out of it and brought him to the clinic. Harvey takes care of Shane, staying up with him while Charlie sleeps in his bed. In the morning, Charlie overhears Harvey and Shane discussing his treatment moving forward; Shane says he wants to get better, and agrees to therapy. Maru walks Shane home, and Charlie helps Harvey shower and puts him to bed.

Thanks for reading! I know this chapter was heavy. I considered not dealing with this scene, because this is generally a happier fic, but Charlie's relationship with Shane is important to the story. And it felt dishonest to Shane's character to either ignore his problems, or ditch the canon to deal with them in another way. While Shane's in-game arc is rough, I appreciate that it's there, and that you can support him through his struggles. Seeing him start having hope for the future was really validating for me.

Remember that if you're struggling, you can always call the National Suicide Prevention Hotline at 1-800-273-8255.

If it helps at all, the next chapter will both be the longest yet (I think?) and contain a lot of fluff, smut, and happier times. Tomorrow: Shane introduces Charlie to a new friend. Charlie and Harvey visit the Ice Festival. Harvey's birthday arrives, and Charlie faces his first test of good-boyfriendhood.

Chapter 15: Winter, Year 1

Chapter Summary

> Shane introduces Charlie to a new friend. Harvey and Charlie explore an igloo. It's Harvey's birthday, and Charlie faces his first test of good-boyfriendhood.

Chapter Notes

> Thanks for sticking with me through the heavy chapter yesterday! To make up for it, here's 10,000 words of fluff, plus a little smut to keep it spicy. NSFW!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Charlie waited outside JojaMart, hands in his pockets, his breath puffing out in front of him. The weather in the Valley had turned even colder, so much that even Bones was uninterested in spending much time outside. Charlie tugged down the sides of his hat, a thick woolen number Evelyn had knitted for him, and wondered if he could persuade her to make a coat for his dog.

He'd gotten used to waiting here over the last few days. Shane had returned to work following his short stint in a Zuzu City rehab clinic, and at least during the first few weeks, it was important that he stay away from any temptation to drink. Charlie had begun meeting him at work at the end of his shift, walking him back to Marnie's ranch so he wouldn't be tempted to stop in at the Stardrop. It meant another couple miles of walking for him each day, but he was glad to do it if it helped Shane get a solid start on his recovery.

The door opened and Charlie turned, expecting Shane, but instead his creepy boss Morris came out. Charlie couldn't really say what it was, but Morris made his skin crawl. Every word he said seemed as though it had been tested and approved by a focus group. And where did he *live?* He didn't have a house in Pelican Town, but he was here every day. Charlie couldn't even remember having seen him outside of the store before.

Fortunately, Morris didn't seem inclined to talk, just nodding at him in the briefest of acknowledgements before hurrying to his car. A few moments later, Shane emerged, shoving his hands deep into his hoodie pockets and swearing under his breath.

"You could get a coat, you know," Charlie said, by way of a greeting. Shane shot him a dirty look, starting down the path without waiting for him.

"I'm not going to give winter the satisfaction. Coats are for the weak."

“Yeah, you’re right. You look super badass shivering all the way home.”

Charlie had worried things might be stilted or awkward between them after Shane came back, but they’d pretty quickly fallen back into their comfortable bickering. He could tell his friend was feeling the strain of being without alcohol for the first time in years—that couldn’t be a picnic—but he seemed genuinely determined to get well. On top of that, Charlie was beginning to see the effects of therapy and antidepressants on Shane. It was still early, but he seemed a little less angry, a little more hopeful. Charlie was proud of him, and had let go of most of his anger and guilt from the “danger night,” as he and Harvey called it.

They passed through the square, Shane still bitching amicably at him about the weather, and Charlie felt a little pang. While he really *was* more than happy to walk Shane home, the one downside of this arrangement was that he no longer had time to stop by the clinic most afternoons. He still saw Harvey in the evenings—the worst of the winter medical emergencies seemed to have passed—but he missed their little tradition, of dropping by the office for a chat (or a quick, breathless round of kissing up against the wall of the exam room, if Maru wasn’t around). And he rarely saw Maru at all these days.

He hoped neither of them felt neglected, but still: it was temporary. Shane wasn’t going to need an escort forever, he was doing really well. Charlie wondered constantly if he ought to be *doing* something, saying something meaningful or being supportive in some more tangible way, but Shane seemed to appreciate just his presence. And so he shuffled along beside him through the snow, puffing out his cheeks to see if he could make rings with the steam from his breath. Or maybe one of those ships Gandalf did in *The Fellowship of the Ring*.

“Hey,” Shane said suddenly as they passed behind Leah’s cabin, the sound of a chisel hitting a mallet echoing through the air. “Got a minute? I want to show you something.”

“Sure,” Charlie said, curiosity piqued. Usually Shane just bossed him around; it was rare for him to make a polite request. He’d thought they were heading into Shane’s room, but instead they turned early and went into the chicken coop. As usual, Charlie was impressed by how advanced Marnie’s operation was. The coop was easily triple the size of his own, toasty even under eight inches of snow and equipped with an automatic feeder. In the corner, a small pen surrounded by heat lamps held a flock of chicks, and Shane led Charlie straight there.

“Here, look,” Shane said, crouching down and reaching into the pen. As always, the flock clambered over each other to reach him, but he seemed to have a specific target in mind. Gently, he cupped his hands around a fluffy yellow chick, lifting him up for Charlie’s inspection.

“He just hatched a few days ago, right after I got back,” Shane said, his tone hushed and oddly reverent. “From my blue hen. Obviously he didn’t get the blue, though.”

“He’s cute,” Charlie remarked, feeling as though he was missing something. Shane’s (admittedly super cool) blue chicken had laid plenty of eggs before, so why was he so excited about this one?

“I mean, *look* at him,” Shane stressed, glowering a little, as though Charlie were being intentionally dense. “He’s the best chick I’ve ever hatched, he’s perfect. See how fluffy he is,

and how shiny his eyes are?"

"Oh, yeah, he's great," Charlie added hastily, though to be honest it just looked like another bird. A very cute little baby bird, but if there was something special about him, Charlie wasn't picking up on it. Shane knew more about chickens than he did, he supposed; maybe there was some kind of invisible chickeny aura he was giving off. Shane squinted at him, radiating suspicion, and Charlie did his best to look totally enraptured by Shane's Chosen Chick. "What are you calling him?"

"I haven't decided yet," Shane said, reluctantly returning the chick to the pen. "It has to be a *really good name.* Something worthy, you know?"

"I do know," Charlie replied solemnly, though he didn't. All of his chicken names were total bullshit. Shane stood, rolling his eyes, and reached for the bag of chicken feed.

"Go bug someone else, farm boy," he said, though Charlie could see a twitch at the corner of his mouth. "Some of us have work to do."

* * * * *

"And the winner of the ice fishing competition, with eight big, slimy fish, is...Pam!"

Harvey clapped for Pam, who was pumping a victorious fist in the air, though he made his most sympathetic face at Charlie. He'd fought a good fight, but only five fish flopped on his stringer. A handful of villagers moved forward to congratulate Pam, and the rest dissipated to other activities; Harvey made his way to Charlie's side as the farmer released his catch back into the frozen lake.

"Sorry, honey," he said, and Charlie shrugged with a smile as he straightened back up.

"Can't win 'em all," he said lightly, pulling his gloves back on. "Anyway, I'm not sure ice fishing is really my thing. Thought I'd give it a try, though."

"You did great. The competition was pretty stiff."

"So are my fingers," Charlie complained, flexing his hands. "Is it really necessary to have an *outdoor* festival in the middle of winter?"

"Oh, I don't know. It's kind of pretty, isn't it?" The Festival of Ice had taken over the clearing in front of Marnie's house, and Harvey thought the planners had done a beautiful job. The snow was studded with glistening ice sculptures, a handful of snowmen had sprung up to the east, and someone—the rumor was Linus—had built a number of igloos all over the clearing. It certainly wasn't a festival you could spend all day enjoying, but Harvey had been cooped up in the clinic for so long, he was happy with the fresh air.

Not to mention the company. Just when Harvey had thought things were about to calm down, the incident with Shane had happened, and now much of Charlie's time was devoted to helping care for his recovering friend. Harvey genuinely wasn't resentful about it, he wasn't a monster, but he still couldn't quash the anxiety he felt when he watched Charlie walk past the

clinic with Shane every day. It had nothing to do with his trust in Charlie and everything to do with his own feelings of inadequacy, but that didn't stop him from fretting. But Charlie was a good friend, and as Shane's doctor, Harvey was glad he had such strong support in place.

And he wasn't going to let his lingering worries ruin their day. Charlie looped his arm around Harvey's waist, the bulk of their coats getting in the way a little, and looked around at the scenery. A light snow had begun falling half an hour ago, and Harvey watched flakes settle into Charlie's auburn hair. It was almost unbearably poetic. Harvey wished he'd thought to bring a camera.

"I've never seen a real igloo before," Charlie said, lifting his chin toward one on the edge of the clearing. "Can we go in them?"

"You have to crawl, but yes, you can," Harvey replied. He hadn't been planning on entering any igloos—he'd done so his first year in town, and his sodden knees had chilled him enough he wasn't eager to repeat the experience—but seeing the way Charlie's face lit up made him change his mind. "Want to check it out?"

They headed for the igloo Charlie had pointed out, arms still slung around each other, and peered through the opening to make sure nobody was inside already. "The coast is clear," Harvey informed Charlie, crouching beside the entrance. "Do you want to go first?"

"After you," Charlie said, bowing grandly and gesturing to the opening. Harvey huffed a laugh, but got down on his hands and knees and began shuffling inside. It was a tight squeeze; whoever had built it hadn't kept the size of the tunnel consistent, and it narrowed as Harvey got further in. His head emerged into the main chamber, but with growing alarm, he realized his shoulders weren't going to make it through.

"Charlie, it's too small, I'm going to back out," he called, hoping his voice would carry through the snow blocks. But a moment later, he jumped as he felt hands on his ankles.

"Sorry, I already followed you!" Charlie called back, and Harvey groaned internally. "Hang on, I'll give you a push!"

Give me a—what— "Wait, Charlie, don't!" he cried, sure that the whole thing would cave in on them. But Charlie apparently hadn't heard him, because he felt a hard shove against his hips (and *that* was not helping him calm down, not at all) just before he popped forward into the chamber. Charlie overbalanced and fell in after him, lying across the backs of Harvey's legs.

"Oof, sorry about that," Charlie said, clearly struggling to contain his laughter. "Wow, it's brighter than I expected in here!" Harvey rolled over beneath him, feeling ridiculous. His glasses were askew, his clothes were full of snow, and there was a sizeable divot in the tunnel wall where his shoulders had once been. But as he caught sight of Charlie's pink face, alight with mischief, suddenly it all seemed very funny to him, too. He laughed and threw a handful of snow in Charlie's face, Charlie retaliated, and before he knew it they were tangled in a giggling heap on the floor of the igloo, stuffing snow down each other's collars. Charlie

managed to get him pinned to the ground on his back, and as soon as Harvey stopped struggling, his grin subsided into something much smaller and more private.

"God, I love you," Charlie said, and kissed him. Harvey was too busy kissing back to respond, but he wrapped both of his arms tightly around Charlie's back, hoping to convey what he couldn't say in words: *yes, me too, I love you too, don't ever stop.* Charlie's mouth opened and his followed suit automatically, and the kiss turned filthy and desperate, all teeth and tongues. He broke away from Charlie's mouth to nip at his neck, loving the way his head flew back, the broken noise that escaped his throat. Charlie's hips ground down against his, seemingly of their own volition, and Harvey hadn't ever anticipated he'd make out with someone in an igloo but he wasn't complaining. They'd managed to have sex a few times over the last week, but he was still feeling the effects of the dry spell they'd endured, and he thought about Charlie constantly: his hands wrapped around Harvey's hips, thrusting; his beautiful mouth stretched around Harvey's cock; his face, contorted in pleasure as he came. It would have felt shameful if Charlie hadn't seemed equally desperate and distractible.

But things were turning heated very quickly, and Harvey was suddenly conscious of the fact that the rest of the village was milling around outside. On top of that, the snow inside his clothes had melted, and he was beginning to shiver in spite of Charlie's warmth. He pulled back, just a little, Charlie still pressing kisses along his jaw. "Charlie," he said, a little breathlessly.

"Mm," Charlie responded, sucking a bruise into the spot where his neck met his ear.

"Char, everyone's outside."

"Mmm."

"And I'm all wet, and I'm cold."

"I'll keep you warm," Charlie purred, attempting to slide his hands up under Harvey's coat. Harvey caught his wrists, laughing.

"That's exactly what I'm suggesting, my dear." Charlie lifted his head then, apparently listening now, and Harvey raised an eyebrow at him. "The farm is so close. And it's warm there, and we can get out of these wet clothes." He ran his gloved fingers through Charlie's damp hair, pushing it out of his eyes. "And you can do whatever nice warm things you want to me, and we won't have to be quiet."

Their second trip through the entrance tunnel was much faster than their first.

* * * * *

Charlie had spent most of his life avoiding serious romantic entanglements, certain that they would overcomplicate things, but he'd been surprised and pleased at how easy things were with Harvey. He kept living his life, working on the farm and spending time with his friends, and nothing had really changed—except there was someone by his side for most of it. He'd started to get used to it, hearing footsteps crunching down the path to his house in the evenings, waking up in the morning to find a pair of vivid green eyes watching him from

across the pillow. At first he'd been terrified that he wouldn't know how to be a *good boyfriend,* but it turned out it was essentially the same as being a good friend, just with more touching and endearments. And sex. (Really, really good sex; if he'd initially been a little nervous that he might get bored, his fears had been totally unfounded. Harvey was up for *anything.)*

But now, for the first time since they'd begun dating, he felt that *good boyfriend* pressure in earnest. Because it was almost Harvey's birthday, and at least where he'd come from, there were *expectations* for what one did for a significant other's birthday. Worst of all, these expectations were maddeningly vague. He couldn't use advice like "give him something personal" or "make sure he has a perfect day." What he needed were *instructions,* some sort of manual he could follow to ensure he fulfilled his boyfriendly duty.

On top of that, he knew Harvey had never in his life been given a really amazing birthday, and he wanted to change that for him. He knew Maru and some of the other villagers had at least brought him a cake the last few years, which was better than nothing, but Charlie felt he could do better. For his friends back in Zuzu City, he'd helped throw a bunch of big surprise parties, but "big surprise party" was not something one could throw for Harvey if their intention was to make him happy. So, in short, Charlie needed to do something that was both a big deal and very low-key. Simple.

Asking for advice from his friends and neighbors had solved many of his problems since moving to Pelican Town, so he'd decided to lean on that tactic again. He hoped to find the birthday-planning equivalent of "plant blueberries in the summer," a simple tip that would change everything. Unfortunately, the results were a lot less useful for this particular question.

From Gus: "Oh, we could throw him an *amazing* party here at the Stardrop! We can get everyone to jump out and surprise him, and we could have dancing, and karaoke, and...where are you going?"

From Maru: "You don't have this figured out yet? It's in five days, Charlie."

From Pierre: "I've got a *wonderful* selection of cards over here, I'm sure there's one he'll love, and everyone loves flowers. By the way, Charlie, your backpack is looking a little shabby. Would you be interested in an upgrade?"

From Shane: "Nuh-uh, I helped you figure out how to ask him out. I'm done with this sappy shit. You're on your own, farm boy."

From Emily: "I went to a jazz club in Zuzu City with my friend Sandy once. He likes jazz, right? You could take him there."

...Well, actually, that last one was pretty helpful.

The morning of Harvey's birthday dawned clear and cold, but by the time the sun rose, Charlie had already been up for quite a while. Harvey was an early riser, so in order to surprise him with anything in the morning, Charlie had to rise even earlier. He'd felt furious at his past self for making these plans when he'd dragged himself out of the warm, soft bed at

four thirty A.M., but a few cups of coffee and an hour later, he'd shaken off the worst of his drowsiness. The clock on the stove flipped to 5:30, and right on cue, he heard Harvey stirring in the bedroom. The man didn't even use an alarm clock; years of medical residency had trained his body like a soldier. Charlie would have been impressed if morning people didn't annoy him so much.

"Charlie?" came Harvey's sleepy voice through the cracked bedroom door, and Charlie made his way toward it with his first surprise of the day. He pushed the door open with his hip, since his hands were otherwise occupied, and felt a smile come to his face at the sight of a sleep-disheveled Harvey. The birthday boy squinted at him, then fumbled on the nightstand for his glasses and pushed them onto his face. When he finally managed to focus on Charlie, his mouth dropped open, eyes going wide.

"What's this?"

"I hope I'm not such a bad cook you can't recognize breakfast," Charlie teased him, approaching the bed with his tray. He'd racked his brain for every breakfasty thing Harvey had ever said he liked: French toast, eggs, bacon, coffee, and fresh orange juice (which Charlie had squeezed by hand since he couldn't fit a juicer in his tiny kitchen, but oh well, it was worth it). He'd set the tray for both of them, so he propped it up over Harvey's lap, then sat cross-legged on the bed opposite him. Harvey was still staring at the tray as though he'd never seen one before, but he finally looked up as Charlie settled himself in place. His face had gone pink—one of Charlie's favorite looks on him, truth be told—and a smile slowly unfurled across his face.

"You made me breakfast?"

"Of course. You can't start your birthday without breakfast in bed." Charlie picked up Harvey's hand where it rested on the quilt, pressing a kiss to his knuckles. "Did I remember right?"

"It's perfect." Harvey lifted his coffee, inhaling appreciatively. "This is the nicest wake-up call I've ever had."

"I wouldn't have made it such an early one, but I knew you'd get up before I could serve it to you otherwise." They tucked into the food, chatting about nothing, Bones begging on the floor beside the bed. It was a level of domesticity he'd never experienced before, and he had the sudden thought that Harvey should wake up in his bed every morning, preferably forever. It wasn't the first time he'd thought it—he remembered feeling something similar when they'd returned to the farm after their hot-air balloon date—but this time, he didn't shy away from it, didn't bury it down. He watched Harvey gesture in the air with a forkful of French toast, enthusing about a new kind of airplane he'd seen on the news with no moving parts, and let the idea flood through him. Was it possible? Could he just keep this? Could they maybe just...be this happy forever?

But that was a train of thought for another day, he decided. Harvey dropped his napkin onto the tray, leaned back against the headboard, and closed his eyes in apparent bliss. "Thank you so much, Charlie," he said fervently. "I loved it. If I didn't have to go to work, I'd go back to sleep."

“Well,” Charlie began, trying not to grin too widely, “I have it on good authority you *don’t* have to go to work today.” Harvey’s eyes flew open and he stared at Charlie, confusion written all over his face.

“What do you mean?”

“I’ve got a man on the inside. Well, woman. And she specifically didn’t accept any appointments for today.” Charlie was nearly bouncing with excitement; Harvey went to the clinic for at least a few hours every single day, this had *never* happened before. “And she volunteered to watch the clinic, so if anyone comes in, she’ll handle it.”

Charlie devoutly hoped the look of shock on Harvey’s face was a good one; he honestly couldn’t tell. “I...have the day off?”

“We have the day off. I got Shane to take care of the chickens, too.” Charlie searched his face, looking for a clue to how he was feeling about this plan. Was it too much? Had he overstepped? “I mean, if you want. If you’d rather go to work…”

Harvey burst out laughing, then covered his mouth with his hand. “Would I rather go to *work?”* he repeated incredulously. “Charlie! We have a whole day to ourselves?”

Oh, god, he seemed happy. Relieved, Charlie gave his ankle a squeeze. “We do. That’s Maru’s present to you.”

“I’ll have to thank her,” Harvey said, still grinning. “Other than festivals, I haven’t had a day off in, what, four years? And I’m still on call for those.”

“I think you’ve earned it.” Earned a lot more, actually, but it was a start. Harvey’s expression shifted a little, turning calculating in a way that made Charlie’s heart speed up.

“In that case,” he murmured, raising an eyebrow, “why don’t we move this tray and go back to bed?”

It was tempting, it really was. Harvey was irresistible like this, his hair still messy from sleep and his pajama pants sliding low on his hipbones. But they had a schedule to keep. “As much as I’d love that,” he said reluctantly, “I’m afraid we’ve got places to be. But I promise, I’ll take you up on that later.”

“Places to be?”

Ninety minutes later, they were settled into their seats on the train to Zuzu City. Their carriage was mostly empty, save for a few scattered commuters dozing in their seats. Harvey kept catching Charlie’s eye and grinning, then ducking his head in embarrassment. Charlie wasn’t sure he’d ever seen anything so cute in his life.

“I still can’t believe you did this,” Harvey beamed, trailing his hand over the back of Charlie’s; Charlie caught it and twined their fingers together, smiling back at him. “I thought I’d be filling out paperwork today, not running off to the city with you.”

“I hope you don’t mind that I, um, borrowed some of your clothes to pack. I thought it might ruin the surprise if I told you to pack a bag.”

“Of course I don’t mind. You shouldn’t have gone to so much trouble, though.”

“Well, we can turn around and go home once we get there, if you want,” Charlie said airily, prompting a laugh from Harvey.

“No, no,” he insisted, with a mock sigh. “The damage is done, I suppose. We’ll just have to make the most of it.”

Charlie rarely saw Harvey like this, playful and giddy with excitement, and it filled him to overflowing with happiness. Clearly he needed to surprise him more often, if this was the reaction he’d get. “What are we doing today, anyway?” Harvey asked, sliding down in the seat to lean his head on Charlie’s shoulder. Charlie dropped a kiss into his hair, then ducked down to whisper in his ear.

“Do you trust me?” he asked, in the lowest, sultriest voice he could muster. Harvey looked up at him through his eyelashes, clearly intrigued.

“You know I do,” he murmured back.

“Then let me surprise you, okay? Just go with the flow. I promise you’ll like it.”

Harvey closed his eyes, snuggling closer. “I’m sure I will.”

They ended up dozing off for the better part of the voyage, Charlie’s head resting atop Harvey’s. It felt strange to be leaving Pelican Town; Charlie realized belatedly that he hadn’t set foot outside the Valley since he’d arrived, nearly ten months ago. He hadn’t really missed the “outside world,” but he *was* excited for this trip. Both he and Harvey needed a break, and as much as he loved Gus’s cooking, the idea of ordering food that didn’t come from the Stardrop’s menu was awfully appealing. When the train pulled into the station, he stirred, nudging Harvey awake. “We’re here, darlin’.”

They walked to their hotel and checked in. It was a small but elegant place, with cozy rooms and antique furniture. Charlie tended to favor more modern places when he traveled, but he knew Harvey’s tastes ran a little toward the traditional, and he'd wanted everything to be perfect for him. (Fortunately, he had enough cash left from the fall's cranberry harvests not to stress about a few vacation expenses.) Once they’d dropped off their bag, they set out into the city. Somehow, in the excitement and stress of planning Harvey’s birthday, Charlie had forgotten that the holiday season was in full swing. The city was at its most beautiful; twinkling lights strung between buildings, trees glittering everywhere, and a light dusting of snow over it all. Even in the daylight, it looked far more magical than Charlie remembered.

“What part of town did you live in?” Charlie asked as they strolled, casually looking for a place to eat. Harvey pointed a gloved hand off toward the east.

“Magnolia Square, in a high-rise. Close to my old clinic.”

“Wow, that’s a swanky neighborhood! I would’ve pictured you in one of those charming old buildings in North Prospect or Riverside.”

“Those were definitely more my style,” Harvey agreed, the corner of his mustache quirking up. “Not Philip’s, though. What about you? Where did you live?”

“Well, I started out in a building that was all Joja employees…”

They walked and talked for half an hour, pointing out landmarks of their old lives as they went. Charlie had been holding onto a vague worry that returning to the city might be painful for Harvey, but he seemed totally at ease, his hand relaxed in Charlie’s grip. Harvey picked out a Japanese restaurant on impulse and they ate at a table in the window, laughing at each other’s rusty chopstick skills. After lunch, Charlie steered them toward a particular shopping area he’d liked in the past, ready to surprise Harvey again.

“You know,” he said, as they approached one of the shops, “I packed you clothes for tomorrow, but I didn’t bring anything for tonight.”

“Tonight?” Harvey repeated, eyes lighting up, but Charlie smiled and shook his head again.

“Still not telling you...but I’m not sure what you’ve got on is going to work.” At Harvey’s confused expression, he winked. “Guess I’d better buy you something.”

“But—Charlie, you’ve done so much already,” he protested weakly, letting Charlie tow him through the door. “There’s no need, honestly.”

“Are you really going to deny me the opportunity to dress you up? I’m hurt, V.”

Harvey rolled his eyes, but gave in, and they spent the next hour or so trying on clothes. Charlie shoved the most ridiculous prints he could find into the dressing room, both of them doubling over in laughter when Harvey came out wearing a blazer covered in Christmas lights or a sweater knitted with candy canes. Sensing they were starting to annoy the staff, Charlie settled down and brought him a stack of real options. He idly browsed a display of ties while Harvey tried them on, and finally heard the dressing room door open behind him.

“I don’t know, Char,” he said, as Charlie turned around. “I feel a little silly, like I’m trying to show off or something. What do you—oh,” he trailed off, as he saw Charlie’s expression. Harvey stood fidgeting in a navy windowpane suit, collar open, no tie. The shirt and jacket hugged his waist much more closely than his usual clothes, and the slim-cut pants made his legs look a mile long. Charlie wasn’t sure what his face was doing, but his mouth felt suddenly dry, and Harvey’s cheeks turned pink. “You like this?”

Charlie stared for a moment longer, unabashedly letting his gaze linger. “No,” he said slowly, and Harvey looked startled.

“No?”

“No. You’d better take it off. Take all of it off, right now.” He crowded a laughing Harvey back into the dressing room, hands on his waist, and they ignored the exasperated looks of

the staff as he kicked the door shut behind them.

Harvey wore the suit to dinner, and Charlie could hardly keep his eyes off him. He'd insisted that Harvey *not* wear a tie, something he rarely went without, and the little triangle of skin at his open collar kept drawing Charlie's gaze. Harvey seemed to know it, smirking a little each time he caught Charlie looking. They were two glasses of wine in, and he seemed to be gaining confidence as they slowly drained the bottle.

"This place is wonderful, honey," Harvey said, spearing a shishito pepper on his fork. "How did you know about it?"

"I used to come here a lot back when I lived in the city," Charlie replied casually—too casually. Harvey raised an eyebrow at him, peering over the rim of his wine glass.

"You did, did you? Any particular occasion?"

"Um, no?"

"Come on, tell me."

Charlie groaned, rubbing a hand over his eyes. "Okay, okay, I used to bring dates here a lot," he admitted, cheeks burning. This had been a *terrible* idea, why had he thought otherwise? "The food is really good, and the cocktails, and it was always kind of romantic, and—what's so funny?"

"I didn't realize you were trying to seduce me," Harvey teased, grinning, clearly enjoying Charlie's spluttering. "You do know I'm kind of a safe bet?"

"That's not it!" Charlie protested, gesturing wildly. "It's just—it—well, it seemed unfair," he finished lamely.

"Unfair?"

"Well, yeah." Charlie took a gulp of wine, trying to compose himself. "It's silly, but...I brought all these dates here, and bought them dinner and drinks, and they didn't even really mean that much to me...and I love you, but I never get to take you anywhere except the Stardrop or my house. I mean yeah, the Stardrop is great, but I wanted to, I don't know, *date* you. So yeah, it seemed kind of unfair, that all those others got the, um, the date experience, but you didn't. I wanted to come here with somebody who mattered to me, I guess."

It was the worst speech in the history of the world, but Harvey was gazing at him with a starry look in his eyes, so he supposed it was okay. The doctor reached across the table, twining their fingers together. "Charlie," he said softly, "no date at a fancy restaurant could ever compare to that picnic back in the woods. Or all the times I've come home exhausted from the clinic, and you've made me dinner. Nobody…" He broke off, swallowing with a smile; Charlie could see he was fighting back a strong emotion. "Nobody has ever treated me

like you do. And I don't need my dinners to come with a Michelin star, as long as they're with you."

Charlie smiled back at him, feeling a little watery-eyed himself, and squeezed his hand. "Well, you say that, but you haven't had dessert here yet," he said briskly, winking. "Trust me, you might change your mind."

Fortunately, Harvey seemed willing to go along with the change of tone, leaning forward and raising his eyebrows. "So. How would this evening go, if this were the Charlie 'date experience'?"

"Oh, well," Charlie began, "we'd definitely order the sticky toffee pudding."

"So far, so good."

"We'd eat it really slowly, and I'd tell you how incredible you looked in that suit." Harvey's cheeks flushed pink, and Charlie grinned at him, as lasciviously as he could manage. "Then I'd tell you all kinds of funny stories, so you'd know how charming I am."

"I think I've heard a few of those."

"If things were going *really* well, I'd maybe try my luck a little. Nothing outrageous, of course, just a little something to gauge your interest, something like…" He pushed his leg forward, sliding his ankle against Harvey's, flirting a little. Harvey's smile broadened, and he leaned his elbows on the table.

"And if that was well-received?"

"Mm." Charlie picked up Harvey's hand, fingers still intertwined, and brought it to his mouth. Gently, reverently, he placed a kiss on his knuckles, then the back of his hand, then turned it over and kissed the inside of his wrist. He heard Harvey's breathing pick up in speed, and smirked against the other man's skin. "I'd kiss you, only on the hand of course, all very above-board. To see if maybe you wanted me to kiss you somewhere else."

Harvey was practically climbing over the table at this point, melting in his hands. "And if I did? Want that?"

Charlie held Harvey's hand in one of his, trailing fingers along his wrist with the other. "Then I'd pay the bill, call us a cab, and take us somewhere more private."

"Oh," Harvey sighed, looking hypnotized.

"But we're not going to do that."

Harvey blinked, the spell broken. "No?" He looked so adorably confused, Charlie wanted to laugh, but he held it in.

"No, because that would be the end of the night, and we're not finished yet."

"We're not? Where else are we going?"

“Let’s get that sticky toffee pudding, and then you’ll see.”

Charlie was going to have to bring Emily the biggest crystal he could find in the mines. The club was perfect: small, dimly lit, intimate. Charlie had managed to reserve them a booth, and fortunately it was the kind that wrapped around the table, meaning he and Harvey could sit practically in each other’s laps during the show. The band wasn’t one either of them had heard of before, but according to Harvey, they were very good and had an impressive repertoire. Charlie took his word for it—he liked Harvey’s music, but hadn’t developed a very discerning ear yet—and just listened, half to the band, half to Harvey’s murmured explanations of jazz terminology in his ear. It was surprisingly hot, listening to his boyfriend explain what modes were and how embouchure affected the notes you could play on a trumpet. Some of the concepts were a little lost on him, but the constant stream of Harvey’s low, impassioned voice was lovely no matter what it was saying.

They worked their way through a couple of cocktails, leaning on each other in the booth, Charlie’s hand running up and down Harvey’s suit-clad thigh. An hour or so into the set, Charlie recognized something: the opening chords of a slow, romantic piece he knew.

“I know this one!” he whispered to Harvey, beaming up at him. “We listened to it in your apartment that one night, didn’t we?”

“We did,” Harvey confirmed, looking proud that he’d remembered. Charlie glanced over to the other side of the room; in a small clear space that seemed to serve as a dance floor, several couples had gotten up and begun slow-dancing. Charlie gave Harvey’s knee a squeeze, tilting his head at the people on the floor.

“Want to dance with me?”

“Okay,” Harvey agreed, visibly blushing even in the dim light. Charlie eased himself out of the booth, holding out a hand to help Harvey to his feet, and they wove their way through the tables together. When they reached the floor, Harvey pulled Charlie close with a hand on his waist, using his other hand to hold up Charlie’s. They swayed together for a moment, Charlie enjoying the delicious warmth of Harvey’s body against him.

“Why do you get to lead? Because you’re tall?” Charlie teased, keeping his voice low. Harvey smirked and leaned in to whisper in his ear.

“Tell me the name of the song, and I’ll let you lead,” he murmured, and Charlie let out a soft laugh.

“...Remind me?”

“The Very Thought of You.”

“Ah, man, I almost had that.”

They fell silent then, turning in their slow circle, just listening to the music. It really was a beautiful song. Harvey's hand was warm and solid in his, the arm around his waist held him close, and he felt a happiness he couldn't put into words. For all his worrying, it really had been an almost perfect day; he hoped Harvey had felt the same. They were drawn to each other like magnets, unable to keep a respectable distance between them. Harvey leaned down to brush his lips against Charlie's hairline; Charlie ran his nose along the underside of Harvey's jaw. Harvey's hand on his waist tightened, and Charlie lifted his head to ask him a question, but it died in his throat when their eyes met.

Something in the air between them had changed. It was the same electricity Charlie had felt as they stared at each other in the hot air balloon, something like what he'd felt when they locked eyes at the Flower Dance. He didn't have a name for it; nobody else had ever been able to take his breath away with a single glance, but then nobody had ever looked at him like Harvey did. Like he was the only interesting thing in the world, the only thing that could possibly warrant his attention. Harvey searched his gaze, and his expression shifted just a little, going (there was no other word for it) *predatory.* And with a sudden rush of clarity, Charlie knew how he wanted the night to end.

The song ended, and almost without speaking, they agreed to leave the club. Charlie paid their tab while Harvey got their coats, and then they were walking hand-in-hand toward their hotel, the silence between them crackling with anticipation. Charlie let himself be towed along, admiring the way the twinkling lights set off Harvey's profile, the way the cold tinged his nose and cheeks with pink. Winter was really Harvey's season, he decided. The man didn't take off his tie at the beach; in an overcoat and a scarf, he looked totally at home.

They breezed through the lobby with barely a word of acknowledgement to the friendly concierge, which was all the confirmation Charlie needed that Harvey was on a mission. As soon as they made it into the elevator and selected their floor, Harvey pressed him up against the wall, leaning in to kiss him with his hands on Charlie's waist. They lost themselves in the long, slow slide of mouths and tongues, and Charlie hoped nobody else had gotten on the elevator because he genuinely couldn't be bothered to look. When at last the doors opened, he gave Harvey a gentle push, then a more forceful one when the first failed to move him.

"Come on, darlin', let's take this into the room, okay?"

They ended up on the edge of the bed, Harvey sitting while Charlie straddled him, kissing and unbuttoning each other's shirts. Harvey got Charlie's opened first and slipped his hands inside, and *yes,* that was very good. But Charlie remembered what he'd decided back at the club and sat back, hands on Harvey's wrists. Harvey responded by leaning forward and pressing his lips to Charlie's collarbone, totally undeterred. Charlie squirmed, laughing.

"I promise we'll get to that soon," he managed, extracting himself and getting to his feet; Harvey looked as though his favorite toy had been taken away. "But it's been a long day, and we rode a train, and I feel kind of...grungy. Do you mind if I take a shower real quick?"

Harvey blinked at him, and Charlie had the distinct impression that his processing speed was a little slower than usual. "I don't mind if *we* take a shower," he amended eventually, and Charlie grinned.

“I can work with that.”

* * * * *

Charlie finished in the shower first, slipping out and saying he’d meet Harvey in the bedroom. When Harvey emerged from the bathroom, toweling his hair, he had to lean on the doorframe for a moment to take in the sight before him. The overhead lights had been turned off and the lamps dimmed, filling the room with a soft, golden glow. Charlie was stretched out on the bed, naked, lazily stroking himself with one hand while the other fisted in the sheets. He looked over at Harvey with heavy-lidded eyes, then tilted his head back in a clear invitation.

“Getting started without me on my birthday?” Harvey teased, dropping the towel and climbing onto the bed. “That’s awfully greedy of you.”

Charlie looked utterly unrepentant, arching his back a little and biting his lip. “Couldn’t help it,” he said breathlessly. “I was just lying here waiting, and I was thinking about you...in there... *ah*... I want you so bad, V.”

Harvey was already hard, and this last declaration made him nearly dizzy with want. He wrapped his fingers around Charlie’s wrist, tugging it away from his cock to pin it above his head. Charlie let out a little whimper of protest, but quickly subsided when Harvey slotted himself between his legs, bringing their hips together. The hot, delicious sensation of Charlie’s body against his own never failed to wring a moan out of him. He slid their open mouths together, spending a long lazy moment just kissing and rolling his hips down onto Charlie’s.

After a few minutes of this, Charlie wrapped his hand around the back of Harvey’s neck, pulling him close to mouth at his ear while he whispered. “Having a good birthday?”

“The best I can ever remember,” Harvey said honestly, shivering at the feeling of Charlie’s breath on his ear. “Seems like it’s about to get even better, too.”

“Oh, did you have something in mind?” Charlie asked with a ghost of a laugh, and Harvey smiled against his skin.

“No, nothing specific. I’m sure we’ll think of something, though.”

“Good, because I already did.” Harvey pulled back a little to look into Charlie’s face, questioning; Charlie responded by taking one of Harvey’s hands in his, guiding it down over his skin, all the way to his cleft. *Wait...does he mean…?* Harvey traced his fingers down to Charlie’s entrance, and nearly died of lust on the spot: his fingertips slid in with almost no resistance. Charlie was slick and open, ready for him.

“I...you…” Harvey found himself at a loss for words, as there was very little blood left in his brain. Charlie smiled, grinding his hips down a little onto Harvey’s fingers.

“You were right. I *am* greedy. I want something for your birthday,” he murmured. Harvey just blinked, still stunned, and Charlie arched his neck up to reach his ear again. “Want you to

fuck me," he breathed, and Harvey's erection gave an almost painful throb.

He pressed two fingers in up to the second knuckle, testing, and Charlie's body arched up against him in apparent bliss. Harvey had imagined it a million times, but he hadn't expected it would really happen; so far, Charlie had always topped, and he'd assumed that was all he was interested in. It was fine, really, *more* than fine. Their sex life was better than he'd ever dared hope, it was the stuff of dreams. But here he was, begging for Harvey's cock, and that was the stuff of Harvey's *literal dreams* .

"How are you this...uh…" As always, Harvey floundered when it came to saying the words out loud. There was something about talking dirty that always embarrassed him, even though he knew it was ludicrous to be shy about some *words* when he had his fingers in Charlie's ass. Fortunately, as always, Charlie knew what he was asking.

"What do you think I did while you were finishing up in the shower?" he asked with a smirk.

That was definitely an image to file away for later—Charlie on the bed, working himself open for Harvey—but there was something Harvey needed to establish first, in spite of his cock's enthusiastic interest in the proceedings. "You know you don't have to, right?" he asked, stroking his free hand down Charlie's face. "I mean, I want to, of course I do. I just don't want you to think...I love the way we usually do it, Char. I'm not—deprived, or anything."

Charlie turned his head and pressed a kiss against his palm. "I know," he whispered, and his smile was so sweet it made Harvey's stomach flip. *How did I ever convince such a gorgeous man to come to bed with me?* "I want it, Harvey. I want to feel you inside me, and I want to give this to you. I told you the first time, I want *everything."*

Harvey's insides twisted pleasurably, and he dove down to capture Charlie's mouth again. Charlie's arms went around his shoulders, and the kiss quickly turned filthy, all twining tongues and teeth nipping at lips. He could have kissed Charlie all night, but there were other things on the menu, things he was *dying* to try. Reaching his free hand down to wrap around the small of Charlie's back, he flipped them over, eliciting a yelp of surprise from Charlie. Harvey felt rather impressed with himself for having managed to keep his fingers in place as they changed positions, and he twisted them a little as he added a third. Charlie let out a wrecked-sounding gasp, burying his face in Harvey's shoulder.

"Okay?" Harvey whispered, and he felt Charlie nod against his skin. Carefully, gently, he withdrew his fingers, earning a needy whine from his partner. He picked up the lube from the nightstand, slicked himself, and gripped the base of his erection to position himself. "Ready when you are, my love," he whispered, and Charlie sat up, eyes filled with warmth. For a moment Harvey thought he was going to say something, but he just pushed himself up into a crouching position, reaching behind him for Harvey's cock.

The first sweet, tight slide of Charlie's body around him was so intensely good, Harvey let out a breath as though he'd been punched in the gut. His hands went involuntarily to those lovely hips, his fingers digging in to help push Charlie down the rest of the way. When he could tear his eyes away from the sight of his own cock disappearing into Charlie's ass, he saw his head thrown back, auburn curls flying. Harvey's gaze traveled down his neck, to his

arms, to his hands, braced on the doctor's chest. It was the most beautiful sight he'd ever seen; he wanted to take a photograph, to hold this image in his mind for the rest of his life. Charlie's head tilted forward again, and his eyes drifted slowly open above a soft, sweet smile. For reasons he couldn't explain, Harvey felt a lump come to his throat; Charlie sensed his emotion and tilted his head a little, quirking an eyebrow.

"What are you thinking?"

Harvey opened his mouth to tell him that he was beautiful, but what came out instead was, "I was just thinking what a miracle you are." Charlie blinked at him, clearly surprised by his answer, and Harvey's hands circled his wrists. "I mean," he continued, flushing with embarrassment, "it's just. I can't believe you're...well, real. That I get to do this with you. This, and everything else. Everything you've done for me." He shook his head on the pillow, feeling intensely foolish. "Yoba, forget everything I just said. I'm getting incoherent and sentimental in my old age, apparently."

Charlie shook his head fervently, leaning forward as far as he could without dislodging Harvey; he just managed to kiss him, hands coming up into his hair. "I don't want to forget," he whispered against Harvey's lips, trailing his nose over his cheek. "I want to remember everything." Harvey released his hips and ran his hands up Charlie's spine, feeling the knobs of vertebrae, the strong muscles. Charlie's breath was warm in his ear, his body hot around Harvey's cock, and the doctor had never felt such a sense of *right.* He tilted his hips, giving them an experimental push, and both men groaned in pleasure.

"Ohhhh," Charlie sighed, pushing himself back up to sitting; Harvey's hands went back to his hips, unable to keep away. They set up a long, slow rhythm, Charlie's head lolling on his shoulders as he rode, and Harvey prayed for extra stamina. He wanted to do this all night, all week, all *year.* Charlie's roaming fingers found one of his nipples, toying with it gently, and he arched his back into the touch.

"Fuck, Charlie," he breathed, and he saw Charlie's leaking cock give a twitch of interest. He met Charlie's eye, and received a breathless grin in response.

"You, talking like that," he explained, breaking off to bite his lower lip at one particularly well-aimed thrust, "god, it does things to me."

Harvey had learned long ago not to question it, but it still caught him off-guard, the idea that Charlie was just as turned on by him as he was by Charlie. Tightening his fingers, he lifted Charlie a few inches, then snapped him back down. Charlie's resulting cry of pleasure was so intoxicating, he did it again, then again.

"Things, huh? What kinds of things?"

"Jesus Christ, *Harvey!"*

"Fuck, you're so good—so tight—"

"Harder, please, *harder,"* Charlie begged brokenly, bracing one hand on the headboard and the other on Harvey's stomach. Harvey felt too light-headed with want to respond, but on his

next thrust he slammed Charlie's hips down with as much force as he dared, wanton gasps falling from his boyfriend's wide-open mouth.

"Ah—ah—ah—ah—"

"Is it—do you—"

"Ah, god, it's so good, don't stop—please—"

"That's it, take it," Harvey growled, and somewhere in the back of his rational mind he was shocked at himself. He was *never* like this in bed, rough and demanding, talking dirty and ordering his lover around—unless you counted the time right after the Fair, when he'd shoved Charlie down and shot his come all over him. Where was this coming from? But based on the keening whine that burst out of Charlie, it wasn't unwelcome in the least, so he let it keep flowing. *"Take* it, Charlie, come on my dick—"

"Yes," Charlie moaned, flinging his head back hard enough that Harvey worried for his spine. "Oh fuck, Harvey, I'm close—I need—"

"Touch yourself, that's it, just like that," Harvey gasped, as Charlie's fingers closed around his own dick and began to stroke. The sight of him jerking himself off as he rode Harvey's cock sent electricity down the doctor's spine, and suddenly Charlie wasn't the only one on the edge. "I'm there too, I'm there, *Charlie—"*

"Come on—"

"Gonna fill you up, I'm gonna—fuck—I'm coming," and he was, his vision nearly whiting out as he thrust up into Charlie and held him there, buried as deep as he could go. His fingers dug into Charlie's hips hard enough to bruise as he emptied himself, and he heard himself shouting hoarsely. It was so good, so unbelievably good, there wasn't going to be a drop of come left in him by the time he finished—

Charlie cried out, and Harvey forced his eyes open just in time to see him stiffen and spurt all over Harvey's stomach and chest. *Yoba,* he was glad he hadn't missed it, because if he'd thought Charlie was beautiful *before* he'd had no idea: his perfect face twisted in pleasure, a deep magenta flush staining his skin, one hand fisted around himself and the other gripping Harvey's side. Harvey managed a few more shallow thrusts, trying to give Charlie as much sensation as he could, before the overstimulation became too much. He dropped his hips back to the bed, hard enough that Charlie nearly toppled over and had to be caught; Charlie's eyes drifted open, heavy-lidded and wrecked, and with a bone-deep sigh he flopped forward onto Harvey's chest.

Harvey's arms came around him immediately, and the fingers of one hand carded into Charlie's damp hair. Charlie's insides still twitched around him, and Harvey stroked him through his deep, shuddering breaths. He could feel his boyfriend's heartbeat through his skin, as rapid and pounding as his own. They lay like that for a long moment while they recovered their powers of speech, and then Charlie tilted his head up, propping his chin on Harvey's chest to look him in the face. Harvey was sure this angle gave him a horrible double

chin, but there was nothing to be done about it unless he wanted one of them to move, and if he had his way neither one of them was ever moving *again.*

“I’m sorry,” he said at last, still feeling vaguely ashamed of the way he’d spoken to Charlie in the heat of the moment. Charlie’s eyebrows went up in an expression of disbelief.

“What *for?”*

“For the—the things I said to you, a minute ago.” Charlie’s face stayed uncomprehending, and he pressed on. “Bossing you around. Treating you like, well, like a sex object. I love you, Charlie, you’re not— *that,* to me. I don’t want you to feel...used.”

All at once, Charlie’s entire face changed, softening into a look of such tenderness it squeezed at Harvey’s heart. “Oh, honey,” he whispered, reaching up to stroke a lock of hair out of Harvey’s face. “I know that. You’re always so sweet to me. You could never make me feel like an object.

“But...sometimes it’s kind of fun to be, well, used. When it’s with someone you trust.” He smiled, pressing a brief kiss to Harvey’s collarbone. “I think it’s pretty clear that I liked it.”

“I know, I just…”

“And I wasn't kidding about the way you talk in bed. My god. Who would have believed such a nice boy would have such a filthy mouth,” he added, his smile widening into a wicked grin, and Harvey felt the last of his anxiety dissipate.

“My boarding school instructors would be *horrified.”*

“Good.” Charlie stretched forward to press their lips together, and they went back to kissing, languid and sleepy now. He let his hands roam up and down that muscled back, knowing he’d have to clean up eventually, but content to leave everything where it was for now. When they stopped for breath, Charlie asked, eyes on his mouth, “Did you like it?”

“Oh, Yoba,” Harvey breathed, his eyes falling shut. “You must be joking.”

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

“You were incredible. That was maybe the best sex of my life.”

“Maybe?” He opened his eyes to find Charlie scowling at him, eyes darkened. “Whose ass do I need to kick?”

Harvey laughed, jostling them both. “Just your own, I’m afraid. All the other contenders were with you.”

“Oh. Well, good, then.” Charlie’s face relaxed again, and he propped both arms on Harvey’s chest, chin on his stacked hands. “Anything else you want today, birthday boy?”

Harvey stroked a hand along his jaw, smiling at the way Charlie pressed his face into his hand. “What I want is to just lie here reminiscing about all those other contenders until we

fall asleep. If you’re amenable.”

“You’re a genius.” Charlie kissed him again, then nestled his head under Harvey’s chin; Harvey felt a surge of protective tenderness, putting his arms around him again. “Happy birthday, Harvey.”

“It really, really was.” The very happiest.

Chapter End Notes

We've reached about the 1/3 mark of this story! I hope you're enjoying watching Charlie and Harvey's relationship develop. To everyone who's left comments and kudos, thank you so much!

Tomorrow: Charlie and Sebastian discuss village traditions. Shane settles on a name for his chicken. Winter Star arrives, but Harvey's secret friend hasn't found him yet.

Chapter 16: Winter, Year 1

Chapter Summary

Charlie and Sebastian discuss village traditions. Shane settles on a name for his chicken. Winter Star arrives, but Harvey's secret friend hasn't found him yet.

Chapter Notes

No major content warnings this chapter, just a little NSFW at the end!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Another day, another afternoon spent loitering around the doors of JojaMart, waiting for Shane. Charlie considered going inside to warm up, but decided it wasn't worth the inevitable hell Pierre would give him if he found out. He was half-convinced the shopkeeper had cameras up around Joja; he seemed to know an awful lot about the comings and goings of its customers.

A week had passed since Harvey's birthday in Zuzu City, and Charlie still caught himself zoning out ten times a day, lost in the memory of Harvey's hands on his hips in their hotel bed. It had been a perfect finish to a perfect day; Charlie couldn't believe how well everything had come together, and Harvey had seemed genuinely thrilled. Next year he'd have to take him somewhere even better, Charlie decided. Maybe the bus to the Calico Desert would be fixed by then, and they could get out of the cold for a little while.

Next year, Charlie echoed mentally, mulling it over. What would next year look like? They hadn't really discussed the future at all, and he didn't have a roadmap for this part. He was sure they would still be together in a year—if Charlie had it his way, they'd still be together in twenty years—but in what capacity? Would they be living together? (That was something Charlie had thought about a lot, but it was tricky, with both of them living where they worked.) Would they maybe be…

Marriage wasn't something Charlie had ever seriously thought about in his old life, but now he let himself return to his train of thought from the morning of Harvey's birthday. The idea of it—of putting a ring on Harvey's finger, of moving all his things into the farmhouse, maybe building a little room for him to work on model airplanes—it made Charlie equal parts excited and nervous, the way he'd felt before their first date. He thought that was probably a good sign.

Although, come to think of it, did people *do* the wedding ring thing here? He racked his brain, but couldn't remember ever seeing one on anybody's hand. Robin, Demetrius, Jodi, George, Evelyn—as far as he could tell, none of them wore a wedding ring. He thought back to when he'd asked Harvey out, to Shane's insistence that flowers were the *only* way to make your intentions clear. Was there some other weird small-town thing you had to do if you wanted to get married?

The sound of shuffling footsteps from the north caught his attention, and he looked up to see Sebastian heading toward the square. The younger man had a cigarette hanging from the corner of his mouth, and he nodded at Charlie in greeting.

"Hey, Seb," Charlie called. "Heading to the Stardrop?"

"Been a while since I kicked Sam's ass in pool," he replied. "Gotta keep him humble."

"Maybe you can give me a lesson one of these days. I've always thought it would be cool to be good at it, but I can barely hit the cue ball."

"I dunno. I might have to take my secrets to the grave." Sebastian stood in front of Charlie, sleeves tugged down over his hands. "Did you read the new *Saga?"*

Charlie pressed a hand over his heart dramatically, falling back against the wall. "I can't talk about it," he moaned. "It's too soon."

"Rough time for a hiatus," Sebastian agreed. "Let me know if you find anything good to fill the void."

"Will do."

"Well…" Sebastian gestured toward the square, tilting his head. "I better head out."

Suddenly, Charlie's earlier question entered his head. He wasn't sure Sebastian was the right source for this information—surely there were people with more enthusiasm for the topic—but then again, maybe someone disinterested was exactly what he needed.

"Before you go," Charlie began tentatively, cursing himself for how nervous he sounded, "can I ask you a question?"

Sebastian looked a bit suspicious, glancing at him across his face, but nodded. "Sure?"

"I know Pelican Town has some, um, different traditions. How do people here...get married? I mean, ask someone to marry them? Back home you get a ring, but…"

Sebastian turned to face him fully now, and the expression of surprise on his face would have been deeply satisfying if Charlie hadn't been crawling out of his skin with awkwardness. Sebastian eyed him, taking a contemplative drag of his cigarette; Charlie had never liked the smell of smoke, but he often found himself envious of the conversational prop it gave you. Smokers really had an edge in the dramatic pause department. "Why me?"

"What?"

“Why are you asking me?” Sebastian spelled out, more clearly. “We’re not really, you know, friends. No offense. I know you talk to Shane and my sister all the time. Why me?”

“Well, honestly,” Charlie sighed, “it’s because you seem to generally kind of hate talking to people, so I figured you wouldn’t gossip.”

“Hm.” Sebastian cracked what almost passed for a smile at that, lips tight around his cigarette. “I guess you’ve got a point there.”

Charlie breathed an internal sigh of relief. “So…?”

“So.” Sebastian turned and gestured into the distance, toward the south. “On the east side of the beach, by all the tide pools, this old man shows up sometimes. The old mariner, I think they call him. He’s only there when it’s raining, and never in the winter. He sells a necklace called a mermaid’s pendant. It’s just, like, a shell on a chain, but a certain kind of shell, apparently. Oh, and he won’t sell it to you if he doesn’t believe you’re really in love. Or something. It costs a bunch of money, and that’s how you propose to people here.”

Charlie blinked at Sebastian for a long moment, absorbing this information. Sebastian went on placidly smoking as though he hadn’t said anything out of the ordinary, and Charlie felt a hot surge of annoyance.

“Okay, you know what, Seb, if you didn’t want to tell me you didn’t have to. I was really nervous about asking, this whole topic is a big deal for me, and you didn’t have to make up some bullshit just to mess with me.”

“I’m not messing with you.”

“And another thing—what?”

“I’m not messing with you,” Sebastian repeated, looking utterly disinterested.

Charlie leaned toward him. “So you’re telling me there is *literally an old man of the sea* who *literally* only appears when it’s raining, and you *literally* have to prove that you’re really in love and he’ll give you some old seashell?”

“For a lot of money,” Sebastian reminded him, and Charlie dropped his face into his hands, clutching his hair.

“Dude,” he groaned, muffled by his palms, “this is the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard.”

“Oh, definitely,” Sebastian agreed, flicking ash on the ground. “I mean. You could probably just get a ring or whatever. It’s not like he’s from around here either.”

“But don’t you think the old folks in the village would give me shit about it?”

“For sure, they would. But Harvey probably wouldn’t.”

“Harvey wouldn’t what?” came Shane’s voice, walking out of JojaMart with his hands in his pockets. Charlie threw Sebastian a panicked, pleading look—he wasn’t ready for Shane to

know yet, he wasn't even sure he was going to *do* it yet, it was too early, he'd just been curious—and Sebastian rolled his eyes, pushing off of the wall.

"I gotta go. Later, Charlie. Bye, Shane."

Shane watched Sebastian go with a deeply suspicious expression, then turned his gaze on Charlie. "What was that about?"

"Nothing."

"Seriously? *Now* you don't want to talk about your dumb relationship?" They started walking toward Marnie's ranch, and Charlie's head was starting to hurt. Why couldn't this town just have a Wikipedia page or something? Why did he have to *ask* people things? And why did Shane have to be leaving work on time the *one* day Charlie was talking about something sensitive?

"I thought you hated it when I poured my heart out," Charlie deflected.

"I do, but *you* don't. You're acting shady."

"You shouldn't ask questions so close to Winter Star," he tried again, and Shane huffed and fell silent. They walked that way for a while, and Charlie thought the subject was finally closed, but when he glanced over Shane had his shoulders hunched up around his ears. That was never a good sign. "Hey," he prompted quietly, and Shane glanced at him without turning his head. "I promise I'll tell you later. Okay? It's just not the right time."

Shane scowled, but his shoulders came down an inch or so, which was good. They walked in silence across the square, concentrating on not slipping on the icy cobblestones. At last, as they passed Jodi and Kent's house, Shane asked, "You're not breaking up with him, are you?"

"What? No!" Charlie was so startled, he nearly laughed. "Of course not. Why would you think that?"

"I don't know. You were talking about Harvey, you wouldn't tell me why."

"Shane, I'm touched. I didn't think you cared about my dumb relationship."

"I care," Shane protested, and Charlie felt a bubble of warmth in his chest.

"I know you do."

They were at the ranch now, and Charlie gestured toward the coop. "How's your favorite chicken doing?"

For some reason, Shane looked embarrassed at this. "He's good," he replied. "Actually, do you want to come see him?"

"Sure."

They entered the coop, Charlie taking a moment to let his eyes adjust to the dim light, and an excited squawking piped up from the far corner. Shane crouched down, and a gawky, adolescent chicken ran toward him. The baby chick was nowhere near as cute as he'd been on Charlie's last visit; his adult feathers were starting to come in, and his fuzz was molting off, but Shane looked as enamored as ever.

"Here he is," Shane said proudly, picking him up and holding him out for Charlie's inspection. "Already getting so big. I can't wait to see what he looks like full-grown."

"He'll be a handsome boy," Charlie agreed. "Did you ever come up with a name for him?"

The embarrassment was back on Shane's face, his cheeks redder than Charlie had ever seen, and he ducked his head, avoiding Charlie's gaze. "Well, um...the thing is, I wanted to name him after somebody good, somebody who was important to me, and I, um, well, you've been a really good friend, while I've been trying to, you know, work on stuff, and uh, anyway...I named him Charlie."

Charlie had never been highly amused and deeply moved at the same time before; it was a weird combination. But Shane was still standing there looking as though he might implode with awkwardness, so he pushed past it quickly. "You named your chicken after me?"

"Yeah. Is that weird?"

"It's not weird." Shane glanced at him, and Charlie stifled a laugh behind his hand. "Okay, it's a *little* weird. But a good weird. I'm really flattered."

"Good," Shane said, still looking silly with embarrassment. He glanced at Charlie again, then said, "Ugh, *here,"* and reached over to pull him into a one-armed hug. It lasted barely a second, during which Charlie was too frozen with shock to move, and then he released him and retreated a good five feet. Charlie the chicken peeped happily from under his arm. Charlie the human felt dazed; had Shane really just *hugged* him? Had he hit his head in the mines and started hallucinating?

"Happy Winter Star," Shane grumbled, turning away. "Now get the fuck out of here. If you start crying, I might actually die."

* * * * *

As far as Harvey could tell, Evelyn and Gus seemed to have some kind of ongoing competition with their past selves, putting up bigger and better Winter Star decorations each feast day. This year, Harvey knew, they'd enlisted Charlie's help to cut down an enormous fir tree, and it had taken Sebastian, Alex, and Sam a whole afternoon to get it carried into the square. Every lamppost was wrapped in garland, and giant candy canes poked up through the snow all through the square. The four enormous tables groaned under so much food, Harvey couldn't believe they stayed standing. Those were Robin's contribution from years ago, with heaters cleverly hidden under each table so the villagers wouldn't freeze to death during dinner.

For the first time since he'd arrived in Pelican Town, Harvey wasn't eating with Maru's family. They'd offered as usual, but he and Charlie had decided to sit with Marnie, Shane and Jas this year. Harvey had hoped this would be the year Lewis would finally just give up the ghost and sit with Marnie, but yet again, he seemed set on pretending they weren't in a relationship. Maybe instead, this would be the year Marnie finally realized she could do better.

Marnie was in the middle of telling a wild story about an escaped cow that had gone on a rampage through the Luau one year—"soup *everywhere,* seriously, we found some on the roof of Elliott's house"—when Harvey felt a gentle tug on his sleeve. He turned to see that Jas had slipped out of her seat, coming to stand beside him.

"Doctor Harvey," she whispered, "Billy's sick." For a moment, Harvey racked his brain; was there a Billy in town? But then Jas held up her teddy bear, and the memory clicked into place. He did his best to school his expression into something serious and doctorly.

"Oh, no," he said gravely. "What's the matter with him?"

"He broke his leg." There was plainly nothing wrong with Billy's leg—all his stitching appeared to be intact, and it wasn't like he had any bones to break—but Harvey supposed it was boring for Jas, sitting and waiting for the adults to finish eating so they could get to the presents. To be honest, all the socializing could be a little boring for Harvey, too.

"Is that so? I'd better have a look at him." Jas passed the bear over, and Harvey laid it out on the table, leaning over to press an ear to its belly. He gave a few disapproving clucks, shaking his head, before taking one of Billy's legs in his hands and gently flexing it back and forth. Jas giggled, her hands over her mouth. "You know, Jas, I don't think it's actually broken. This looks like a bad sprain," he intoned, sitting back up. "How did he hurt it?"

"He was riding a pig, even though Aunt Marnie told him not to," Jas said through a smile, less shyly now. "She always says he'll fall off and get hurt."

"Looks like Aunt Marnie gave him good advice," he replied. "Fortunately, I know just what to do about this. Can you help me?"

"Yeah!"

"Grab me that bandage, would you?" he asked, pointing to an unused cloth napkin toward the end of the table. Jas darted around her chair and snatched it up, then came back and presented it to him with both hands. Harvey took it from her with great ceremony, then shook it out and folded it into a long strip. Jas watched this process with rapt attention.

"Now, I'm going to need you to hold his leg steady. Okay?" Jas seized Billy by the hip and foot—hard enough that Harvey winced a little in sympathy—and waited, eyes on Harvey. He carefully wrapped the bear's stuffed leg in the folded napkin, tucking the ends together and tying it in a neat knot. As he finished, he realized that the table had fallen silent; he looked up to find Marnie, Shane and Charlie watching him, their story apparently over. Marnie and Shane looked amused, but Charlie seemed to actually glow with warmth. The smile on his

face was soft and private, and maybe a little wistful. For the first time, Harvey dared to hope they might be on the same page, someday. (Even if he'd still been too scared to bring it up.)

With difficulty, Harvey tore his eyes away from Charlie and back to Jas. "There we go," he said, handing over the bear. "Make sure he keeps his weight off it for a few days, and he'll be all right. And no more riding the animals, okay? I'm putting you in charge of him. Doctor's orders."

Jas grinned at him as she hugged her bear, rocking a little. "Thanks, Doctor Harvey," she said, and scrambled back into her seat with Billy. Harvey straightened, turning back to Charlie while Jas showed Billy's bandage to Marnie and Shane. Beneath the table, Charlie's hand settled on Harvey's thigh.

"Why are you so adorable?" Charlie murmured into his ear, and Harvey blushed.

"I don't know what you're talking about," he whispered back. "There was a legitimate medical emergency that needed my attention."

"I think *I* might need your attention later."

"I'll clear my schedule."

An hour later, the dishes had been cleared and most of the gifts exchanged. Caroline had presented Charlie with a gift certificate to Pierre's—a bit self-serving, Harvey thought, but at least it was genuinely useful—and Harvey had given Leah a nice bottle of wine. (He'd tried to give her a first-aid kit, but Charlie had insisted that was *not* a gift one could give someone for a holiday. "But think of her work!" Harvey had protested, imagining all the splinters and pinched fingers. "The point is to *not* think of work," Charlie had declared, and that had been that.)

Everything seemed to be gone from under the tree, but Harvey was still empty-handed. As Charlie left Caroline and returned to his side, he wondered if there had been a mistake.

"Whatcha looking for?"

"My secret friend hasn't found me yet," Harvey said, craning his neck to look around the crowd. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Charlie break into a grin, and looked at him in surprise. "No! You? What are the chances?"

"Well, it turns out they're pretty good, when you trade someone for a specific name," Charlie admitted, and Harvey burst into laughter. Charlie fished in his pocket, and Harvey noticed his smile had turned a little nervous; what did he have to be nervous about? Surely, by now, he knew Harvey would love any gift he wanted to give. At last, he drew a small, flat box wrapped in silver paper from his pocket, holding it out shyly.

"It—um—well, I'll tell you when you open it," he said, piquing Harvey's curiosity as he accepted the package. He gave it a little shake; something shifted inside, though it didn't

rattle. He glanced up to meet Charlie's eye, and the farmer nodded. "Go ahead."

Harvey took his time, teasing Charlie a little by drawing it out. He tugged the white ribbon slowly out of its bow, then began carefully lifting the paper, not tearing it. Charlie groaned, and at last Harvey took pity on him and ripped the rest of the paper off. It was a small, plain cardboard box, not offering any clue to its contents. When he lifted the lid, he recognized the object inside, but it took him an embarrassingly long moment of blank staring to put together the significance of the gift.

Oh. *Oh.*

Lying on a bed of tissue paper was a shiny, silver key.

"Okay, so," Charlie began, his voice trembling just a little, "listen, I know it doesn't really make sense for me to ask you to move in with me." Harvey's head snapped up so quickly he nearly injured his neck, his heart suddenly pounding. "I mean, you live above your office. I'm sure you don't want to add a mile of walking to your morning commute—"

"I—I don't mind."

"—but I was thinking maybe you could kind of treat the farm as your, um, your home base? And keep some of your stuff there, and just stay at the clinic when you have a lot of work to do, or—"

"Yes."

"Or if you want, you can just think of this as, um, an invitation? To come and go whenever you want, even if I'm not home—"

"Yes."

"But you don't have to live with me if you don't want to, I know it's pretty fast and it's not that practical, but I just love it when you stay, V, everything's so much better when you're around, and—wait." Charlie's ears finally seemed to catch up with his brain, and he interrupted his own (adorably) rambling speech to stare at Harvey. "Yes? You mean…"

Harvey threw his arms around Charlie's shoulders and pulled him close, the new key still clutched in his fist and his pulse racing. "Yes. *Yes.* Of course I want to live with you." He ducked down to kiss Charlie, filled with a wild happiness. Charlie wanted to *live* with him, wanted to wake up to him every day. It was more than he'd ever dared hope for; he felt weightless with joy.

Charlie broke away, grinning again. "Really?" he asked, holding Harvey's face between his palms.

"Are you kidding? Charlie. If I had it my way, we'd never leave your bed."

Charlie looked as happy as Harvey felt, eyes crinkling above his smile. *"Our* bed, now," he amended, and Harvey thought his heart might actually burst. He'd expected to end the day

with some coffee beans or maybe a new necktie. Of all the Winter Star gifts he'd envisioned, he had never in his wildest dreams imagined getting a *home.*

"When can I, um…"

"Anytime," Charlie said quickly, that blinding grin still in place. "Whenever you want. Now? Well. Probably not *now."*

"Definitely now." The party was breaking up anyway; families were drifting off toward their houses in little clumps, carrying their gifts and bundles of leftover food. Shane and Marnie had already begun the trek back to the ranch, holding hands with Jas and swinging her over the snowdrifts. As Harvey scanned the square, he caught Maru's gaze from a few tables away; beaming at her, he flashed the key in his palm and winked. She grinned back, bouncing on the balls of her feet a little. He'd have to fill her in on the details later.

In the meantime, he had things to do. Lacing his fingers through Charlie's, he tugged him toward the clinic. "I don't really have that much to bring with me," he said. "Just some clothes, mostly."

"Not your model planes?"

"Maybe one or two," Harvey conceded, "but I don't want to clutter up your whole place with my airplane stuff." Charlie tugged lightly on his hand, and when Harvey turned to look at him, he had his brows lowered in mock reprimand.

"Not *my* place, not anymore. Remember?" he prompted, and Harvey felt that surge of joy again.

"Right," he whispered, not trusting his voice. "My mistake."

It didn't take them long to pack the things he intended to bring along. At Charlie's insistence, he boxed up his nicer turntable (leaving an old, battered one as a spare) and most of his records, along with a dozen favorite books, his four nicest model planes, and the model he was currently working on. His clothes all fit into two suitcases and his toiletries into a duffel bag, and then he was more or less ready to go.

"I'll leave the radio for now," he said, indicating the sprawling setup on his desk. "I can come back here to use it, and I don't really know where we'd put it."

"Sorry the house is so small," Charlie said regretfully, but Harvey gave a firm shake of his head.

"It's *perfect.* Don't you dare." He winked as he hoisted the duffel onto his shoulder. "Anyway, it's my house too, now, isn't it?"

Charlie's face could have lit the room. "Right. My mistake."

Pierre lent them his car, and they trundled slowly down the dark gravel road, occasionally spinning in a patch of snow. The silence between them was comfortable, Charlie's hand warm on his knee as he drove. Harvey couldn't guess at what he was thinking, but his own

thoughts were a jumbled mess of excitement. It had all just begun to sunk in, with his belongings piled into the back of the SUV: he didn't have to feel like an imposition anymore. He didn't have to wonder, lying in a sated tangle of limbs, whether Charlie would prefer him to go back to his own apartment. He didn't have to make plans to meet Charlie in the evenings, because there would be an assumption that Harvey would make his way home eventually.

Home. It was a word Harvey had spent years thinking about, without coming to any satisfying conclusions. Where was his home? Not Zuzu City, shuffled from an unloving household to an impersonal series of schools. Not his old apartment there, haunted by memories of a man who hadn't loved him back. Pelican Town was the closest he'd ever come, yes, but walking through the door of his solitary apartment had never filled him with that intangible feeling of comfort, of peace, of belonging. It was as though he'd been biding his time there, waiting for something better to come along.

But as he pushed through the door of the farmhouse with his arms full of box, Bones leaping all over him and Charlie laughing as he tried to scold the dog, he felt something settle into place that had been rattling around inside him for years. Charlie showed him to the empty drawers in the dresser, the open space on the bookshelf, the table he'd cleared off in the corner. And it occurred to Harvey: maybe this was how Charlie felt, too? Maybe those empty drawers and bookless shelves had felt, to Charlie, the same way Harvey's single bed and table for one had. Maybe...Harvey wasn't just taking up space here.

Maybe he was filling a void.

Charlie lit the fire and poured them glasses of wine while Harvey began unpacking—the turntable first, this occasion called for music. While Dizzy Gillespie filled the house, Harvey put his clothes away and arranged his model airplane supplies on the spare table. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Charlie organizing the bookshelf, slotting Harvey's in beside his own. Though he could only glimpse his profile, he could tell the smile hadn't left Charlie's face. He suspected it was mirrored on his.

Pierre had told them not to worry about returning the car until Harvey came to work in the morning, and so, when they'd finished unpacking, they took their wine and piled into bed—even Bones, who didn't understand the situation but was thrilled anyway. Sprawled out over the quilt, a tail thumping happily against his leg, Harvey let his head roll to the side and looked at Charlie. The corners of his boyfriend's mouth were turned up slightly, and Harvey reached over to stroke an errant curl out of his face.

"Penny for your thoughts?"

"Just enjoying the view," Charlie murmured, and ducked his head a little. "I've never lived with anyone before. I can't really believe you're staying."

"Not having second thoughts, are you?" Harvey asked the question lightly, trying to ignore the tiny flutter of anxiety in his stomach. Charlie shook his head, smile widening, and rolled closer to kiss him.

"The opposite," he assured Harvey, the words brushing softly over his lips.

It had been a long day; the socializing at festivals always wore Harvey out, and then they'd moved boxes for an hour or two, with a few glasses of wine to top it all off. He could have fallen asleep easily, but as always, Charlie's lips on his were a more powerful draw than anything else. Without looking, he reached behind him and set his wine glass on the nightstand, then plucked Charlie's from his fingers and did the same with it. Precarious liquids out of the way, they were free to wrap themselves in each other's arms, hands sliding into hair and down spines. Distantly, he heard Bones make a disgruntled noise and hop down off the bed, shuffling into the other room.

Harvey mouthed along Charlie's jaw until he reached his ear, tracing the shell of it with his tongue as he unbuttoned Charlie's pants and slipped a hand inside. Charlie gasped softly against his hair as Harvey's fingers closed around him, drawing him out and stroking gently. "I love you," Harvey whispered against his ear, and Charlie gave a shuddering exhale.

"Oh, god. Harvey. I love you too, I—that's it, just like that." Charlie's own hands made quick work of Harvey's pants, mirroring his movements; Harvey had to bite down on his lip to keep from breaking his rhythm. They stroked each other in tandem, mostly quiet except for their heavy breathing, leaving trails of kisses on each other's skin and fitting as close together as they could. "You're so good, so good," Charlie praised him, his forehead pressing hard into Harvey's shoulder as his body tensed. "Is it—do you want—"

"I want to see you. Let go, my love," he whispered, speeding up his strokes. It was funny; now that they had all the time in the world, he felt less pressure to draw everything out, to make sex an *event.* They could just fall into bed together like this, touch each other and kiss each other and fall asleep together, because Charlie would still be there in the morning. The thought sent a fresh wave of joy through him as Charlie let out a desperate whimper and came, hips bucking, into Harvey's fist. Harvey stroked a hand up and down Charlie's back, soothing him through the aftershocks of his orgasm with gentle murmurs of adoration. They lay like that for a few long moments, Harvey's own need beginning to subside. He was more tired than he'd realized; though Charlie's hand had felt wonderful, it was okay if he didn't get off, maybe they could just drift off together, or—

That train of thought was thoroughly derailed when Charlie, with no warning at all, slipped out of Harvey's arms to slide down the bed. In one movement, he brought himself to eye level with Harvey's cock and swallowed it down. "Yoba, Charlie!" Harvey hissed, his hands fisting in the quilt. "You don't—I was— *oh,* please, don't stop," he babbled, giving up his half-hearted protests instantly. He felt Charlie grin around his dick—always an incredible feeling, one he could never get enough of—and then a hand closed around his wrist, tugging gently. He opened his eyes to see Charlie guiding his hand, bringing it to his own head. Harvey threaded fingers into his tousled curls, stroking a little. "Is—is that what you wanted?"

Charlie lifted off with a *pop,* just long enough to deliver the single word, "Almost," then winked and returned to his work. Harvey stared at him, still unsure what he was after, until Charlie gave another sharp downward tug to Harvey's wrist—pushing Charlie's mouth down around Harvey's cock.

Oh.

Well, then.

Harvey's fingers tightened in Charlie's hair, just barely enough to pull a little; Charlie's eyes fell shut and he let his hand drop away from Harvey's wrist. "Are you sure?" Harvey whispered, and Charlie's answering moan was all the persuasion he needed. He tugged at Charlie's hair, pulling him almost all the way off his erection, and paused to admire the view of his own cock resting on Charlie's swollen lower lip; then, he shoved his head downward again, thrusting his hips forward at the same time. *Yoba,* it felt incredible, but even more incredible was the effect it had on Charlie: he let out a bone-deep whine as though *he* were the one fucking his beautiful boyfriend's mouth. A memory came back to him from his birthday, of Charlie praising his dirty mouth, telling him how he liked to be used. Well, if Charlie liked it…

He threw caution to the wind and fucked into him, pushing his head down with every thrust. Charlie let out a series of staccato moans, fingers clenching around Harvey's hips, and went along for the ride. "Fuck, Charlie, I love it, so fucking good, so—" The familiar sensation began to pool low in his belly, spreading through him, building and focusing. "Are you ready? I'm gonna—oh, god—coming, I'm coming," he gasped, burying himself to the hilt in Charlie's mouth and spilling over. He felt Charlie swallowing around him, and if he hadn't already been coming, that would have pushed him over the edge. Charlie sucked at him gently until Harvey shuddered, and then lifted his head off, resting it on Harvey's hip with a self-satisfied smile.

"Welcome home," he whispered.

Chapter End Notes

Happy Saturday! I hope you're having a nice weekend, wherever you are in the world. <3 Fun fact: I wrote this back when the Saga hiatus had just started! I definitely didn't think it would still be going at this point :)

Tomorrow: Charlie gets a letter from his mom. The Flower Dance comes around again, but there are complications. The farm welcomes a new baby.

Chapter 17: Spring, Year 2

Chapter Summary

Charlie gets a letter from his mom. The Flower Dance comes around again, but there are complications. The farm welcomes a new baby.

Chapter Notes

Our first totally SFW chapter in a while!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Charlie stood on the front porch of his house, amazed by how noisy things had gotten around the farm. The chickens clucked raucously in their sunny patch of grass, stretching their wings after the long winter; Bones raced around chasing birds, barking; Robin was working on a new shed, hammering away; and inside, the turntable spun an old ABBA record. (It seemed Harvey had been holding out on him; he'd found the vinyl tucked between a pile of much more respectable jazz albums.) This year, the view looked a little different: the overgrown patch of dirt had been replaced by row after row of tilled fields, a shiny green bicycle leaned against the porch (an early birthday gift from Harvey), and the ramshackle cabin had been built into a nice, solid little house. And of course, he was no longer the only inhabitant, though his housemate had left for work before the sun was up.

All in all, it was a pretty decent year's worth of work, he thought, inhaling the steam from his coffee. He was fit; he was, if not wealthy, at least financially comfortable; he was loved; he was happy. What a change from a year ago, when he'd stood in this same spot and wallowed in despair. Though he knew he owed a lot of his success from the year to his own hard work, he owed just as much of it to other people: Pierre and Marnie, for helping him plan crops and care for his animals; Shane, for chicken assistance and moral support (in his own surly way); Maru, for helping him build sprinklers and improve his systems; and of course, Harvey. Wonderful Harvey, adorable Harvey, who had patched him up over and over again, body and soul. Harvey, who had turned *Pelican Town, the place I'm living right now* into *Pelican Town, my home.*

That happy thought made him remember the letter crinkling in his pocket—a much less happy thought, but he supposed he couldn't put it off forever. Sighing, he tucked his coffee mug into the crook of his elbow while he fumbled the battered white envelope open. The sight of his mother's wide, looping script always brought a complicated swirl of emotions: he found it comforting at first, but that was quickly chased away by whatever she'd written this

month. Still, hope sprang eternal; maybe, against all prior evidence, *this* would be the month she stopped trying to convince him.

> *Dear Charlie,*
>
> *I can't believe it's been a year since you left the city. I have to admit, I expected you'd get tired of country life long before now. You know the door's always open if you've changed your mind.*

Or maybe it wouldn't be this month, after all.

She went on to report some details Charlie wasn't especially interested in, things about Charlie's old friends, her book club, Zuzu City politics. Charlie read it all dutifully, thankful that at least she'd kept the lecture to that one sentence—but then he arrived at the real gem.

> *I went over to Marjorie's house the other day (you remember her, she used to watch you when you were little!) and her son Isaac was visiting. He's a nice boy, just moved back to the city after getting his MBA, and very handsome. He and I talked for quite some time, and I showed him your picture. I think he was* very *interested, sweetheart. Why don't you come visit me, and you can meet him? You two have a lot in common, between business school and books.*
>
> *I know you keep telling me not to, but I've sent you a little something, just to help with your bills. Or if you really don't need it, spend it on a train ticket. Your mother misses you.*
>
> *Love,*
>
> *Mom*

Charlie sat down on the step, staring at the letter with blood pounding in his ears. *He's a nice boy. I think he was* very *interested.* Was his mother honestly trying to lure him back to the city by *setting him up?* She *knew* about Harvey. Charlie had responded to every one of her letters, and he'd sent at least a dozen of them since he and Harvey had started dating. Hell, he'd told her about Harvey before they'd even become boyfriends; she'd seen the whole thing unfold in real-time through his writing.

The town doctor is really nice, he'd said in his first letter home.

In the second one, he'd written, *I brought Doctor Harvey some pickles today, because I heard he liked them. You should have seen his face! It was like nobody had ever given him a present before. (Turns out he's kinda cute, too.) I'm gonna have to get more jars.*

A few weeks later: *Doctor Harvey came over and stitched up Bones after he fell down a well I was digging. I was a total mess, and he doesn't even take care of animals usually, but he was so sweet about it and Bones is fine. We're really lucky to have him.*

The worst part of being so busy, he'd written in the summer, *is that I haven't had a chance to visit any of my friends. It feels weird to write letters to someone who lives a mile away, but*

Harvey and I have been writing back and forth. It's kind of nice, having something to look forward to at the end of the day, when I'm covered in dirt and about to pass out.

Later in the summer: *...anyway, it wasn't a big deal, don't worry about me, but I got some little burns on my legs doing farm stuff. Harvey got up in the middle of the night to patch me up. I don't know what I'd have done without him.*

And then: *I think maybe I'm falling for him, Mom.*

And then: *I finally asked Harvey out yesterday. And he said yes!*

He'd filled her in on lots of details, about the dates they went on and the things Harvey said, about gifts they gave each other and new things he learned about his boyfriend. He *hadn't* told her about their Zuzu City date, because he knew she'd be hurt that they hadn't gone to visit, but he'd wanted the day to be all about Harvey. In his last letter, written the day after the Feast of the Winter Star, he'd delivered what he'd assumed would be welcome news.

Harvey moved in yesterday. I was so nervous to ask him, but he acted like it was the easiest decision he'd ever made. I almost couldn't sleep last night, I was so excited. He's really good for me, Mom. I've never been so happy, ever.

Charlie had assumed his mother was happy for him, but thinking back over her letters, she'd either glossed over his mentions of Harvey or not responded to them at all. How had he not noticed before? And why was she so determined to pretend he wasn't seeing anyone? It didn't make sense; she didn't even know Harvey, she couldn't possibly disapprove of him. And he was a *doctor,* for pete's sake. Wasn't that essentially the dream son-in-law scenario?

Not son-in-law, you're not married, his brain helpfully reminded him, and he shook his head to clear it. He and Harvey had barely started living together; it was too soon to really think about anything else. Even if, so far, their cohabitation had been going really, really well. Even if Harvey had asked Charlie to show him how he could be helpful around the farm. Even if they fell asleep grinning at each other like idiots most nights.

Well. Anyway.

Charlie loved his mom—current outrage over her dismissal of Harvey aside—but he was in no hurry to go back and visit. Her constant pleas for him to move back home were bad enough in written form, and he wasn't eager to subject himself to the live version. And of course, it was spring, which meant he was buried under a pile of seeds that needed planting, weeds that needed pulling, sprinklers that needed installing (god bless Maru). There just wasn't time, even if he'd wanted to head back to the city. In fact, he'd wasted enough time already this morning, sitting on the porch and feeling indignant. Shane had offered to come over on his day off and help get the first round of seeds in the ground, an offer Charlie couldn't possibly pass up. Maybe Shane would be willing to take him to Pierre's in Marnie's truck; it would be nice not to have to to lug fertilizer and seeds back by hand, even if the bike made it much easier. And they could stop in and say hi to Harvey while they were at it; Charlie knew he'd be glad to see them. Harvey was sort of quiet around Shane these days, but he assumed it was a little bit of residual awkwardness after the night he'd brought Shane

into the clinic. With enough exposure to each other, Charlie hoped the two of them could be friends.

But before he went to town, Charlie needed to write a strongly worded letter to his mother.

* * * * *

Harvey's footsteps slowed to a halt on the grass. He could just make out the strains of music and laughter coming from across the bridge; a few more steps and he'd be in the thick of the Flower Dance. As it did every year, his stomach gave a dull lurch. The thought of all those people, everyone in town, all wanting to talk to him—watching him *dance*— he'd tried so hard to get out of it, but the sun rose and set by tradition in Stardew Valley, and somehow he always ended up lining obediently up with the other dancers. And this year, he had even more reasons to dread it.

As he finally made himself cross the bridge, the meadow opened up before him: barrels of flowers everywhere, a floral arch marking the entrance, Pierre waving merrily from his little stand. He saw the townsfolk all clustered together in groups, the women dressed in white, the ostensibly single men—like himself—dressed in blue. He'd protested when Caroline had come to pester him about his suit, explaining that he *actually* wasn't single anymore, but she'd refused to accept his excuses. "Until you dance at your own wedding, you dance in the Flower Dance," she'd said firmly, and somehow, that had been that.

Harvey stepped awkwardly into the meadow, eyes already scanning for Charlie, but the farmer was nowhere to be found. Sighing through his nose, he jumped when a hand wrapped around his elbow. He looked down to see Maru smiling at him, beautiful in her white dress.

"He's not here yet, I checked," she said with a wink. Harvey smiled, leaning down to kiss her cheek.

"You look lovely," he said, allowing himself to be led to the punch bowl. "Ready for the dance?"

"Am I ever?" Maru deadpanned, ladling drinks for them both. "I wasn't sure how it was going to work this year...are you…" She gestured eloquently at Alex and Haley, who were off practicing in a corner. As always, Haley wore an expression of intense focus, while Alex kept sneaking longing glances at the punch bowl. "I'm assuming I'll need a new dance partner?"

Harvey's mustache lifted at the corner, a humorless little smile. "I wouldn't be so sure about that," he replied, trying to keep the bitterness from his voice. "There's a *boy* dance and a *girl* dance. I don't think anyone's ever had to worry about what to do when two 'boys' want to dance together."

"What did Charlie think about it?"

Harvey wished he knew. Every time he'd brought up the topic with Charlie, his boyfriend had been oddly evasive about it. Any attempt to pin down a plan had been met with *"Oh, we'll figure it out,"* and Harvey had been too shy to outright ask him if they could find a way to dance together. It upset him a little, this refusal to talk about it, but he felt silly for caring so

much. “I’m not sure,” Harvey admitted, rubbing a hand through his hair. “It’s fine. We can dance separately and then spend the rest of the festival together. It doesn’t mean anything.”

Maru gave his hand a squeeze, her eyes full of sympathy. “It sounds like it does,” she said gently. Harvey squeezed back, but didn’t respond. How could he explain, when it didn’t even make sense in his own head? He didn’t care about this festival; he’d always just endured it, doing his best to be a respectable dance partner for Maru, trying not to embarrass her. He’d never really understood the appeal of dancing in front of so many people. So why, now that he had a boyfriend, did he suddenly *want* to dance? It wasn’t even as though the villagers were homophobic; as far as he knew, no one had offered so much as an unkind word about his relationship with Charlie. In fact, everyone had been vocally supportive. It simply hadn’t been an issue they’d ever had to think about in past years.

Lost in his own head, Harvey managed to nod along to the chatter of Maru’s parents, and he supposed he gave adequate responses to Demetrius’s scientific lines of conversation. His eyes continued searching the crowd. Charlie wasn’t going to skip the event entirely, was he? And if he was, why the hell hadn’t he invited Harvey to skip it with him? They could be sprawled beneath a cherry tree on the farm right now, looking up at the drifting pink petals and ignoring all the hubbub coming from the south. Perhaps it wasn’t too late—maybe Harvey could sneak away, go find Charlie and—

“Oh, it’s time to line up,” Maru said suddenly, pointing. Alex, Haley, Sam and Penny were already in formation, Haley looking around with an expression of supreme annoyance on her face. Harvey’s shoulders slumped; apparently Charlie wasn’t coming after all. He turned to see if Maru was ready, and came face to face with Shane instead. The man looked nearly as uncomfortable as Harvey felt—his suit seemed to hang differently on his frame than it did on the other young men, as though he’d forgotten how to wear anything but a threadbare hoodie, and he wore a gloomy expression.

“Ready?” Harvey asked Shane, trying for a tone of gallows humor, but Shane shook his head.

“Emily sprained her ankle, remember?” he said, indicating the blue-haired woman across the clearing. She was perched in a folding chair, her wrapped ankle thrust out in front of her, talking animatedly to Clint. “No dancing for me this year.”

“Oh!” Harvey exclaimed, catching Maru by the arm. “Maru, you should dance with Shane this year. His partner’s out of commission.”

“Oh no, seriously, it’s—” Shane started, at the same time that Maru blurted, “But Harvey, don’t you—”

“Please,” Harvey said, willing Maru to understand his tone. “I’ll sit this one out.”

Maru searched his face for a moment, the corners of her mouth downturned. She gave a minute shake of her head, then sighed and turned to Shane. “Come on,” she said to him, tugging Shane’s unwilling arm. “You can tell me how your latest brood is doing.”

As they walked away, Harvey felt relief and disappointment in equal measure. He hadn’t wanted to dance with Maru, but it was a little depressing to be sidelined on the first year he’d

ever wanted to dance with *someone.* The other dancers took their positions, but the music didn't start right away; Haley still gave off waves of irritation, not at all the dainty Flower Queen ambiance she normally tried to project. The lines of dancers shuffled and murmured amongst themselves, curious about the delay. At last, just as Elliott turned to ask Lewis why they were waiting, Haley called out, "About *time!"*

"Sorry, sorry," called a familiar voice over Harvey's shoulder, and he whirled around. The sight before him was so unexpected, he nearly took off his glasses to clean them, but there he was: Charlie jogged toward him, slightly pink from exertion, wearing the blue dress pants of the traditional spring suit. But the jacket and tie were nowhere to be found. Instead, Charlie wore a crisp white shirt Harvey had never seen before.

And, tucked over his left ear, was a spray of dainty white flowers.

"I couldn't figure out what to do with these," he called, gesturing to the flowers, and Haley rolled her eyes almost audibly.

"You were supposed to *pin* them to your *shirt,"* she sighed.

Charlie laughed. "Ah, well. Next time." Harvey openly stared at Charlie as he approached, rooted to the spot. Charlie slowed to a stop before him, beaming from ear to ear. "I'm sorry I'm late," he said a little breathlessly, holding out his hand. "Ready?"

"I...ready for what?" Harvey stammered, feeling utterly wrong-footed. Charlie's smile only widened, and he tossed his head toward the lines of dancers.

"To dance, darlin'," he said, as though it should have been obvious. "You didn't think I'd stand you up, did you?" Without waiting for an answer, he took Harvey's hand and tugged him toward the other dancers. A spot had opened up beside Haley and Alex, and Charlie headed straight for it. Suddenly, Harvey's brain came back online, and he was horribly aware of everyone in town staring at them.

"Wait—but—there's different ones for—we're both—" Charlie paused, noticing the expression on Harvey's face, and stepped close enough to whisper in his ear.

"Don't worry," he breathed, sending a delicious shiver down Harvey's spine. "I've got you."

Harvey felt his protests die in his throat; he gave a tight nod, and Charlie resumed tugging him forward. He positioned Harvey in the line of men between Alex and Shane, giving his hand a final squeeze before releasing it to take his place between Haley and Maru in the line of women.

As the music began, Harvey wasn't sure he'd ever been so surprised in his life. There was Charlie—his very *male* Charlie—standing between the single women as though he'd always belonged there, an easy smile on his face. Harvey still couldn't imagine how this was going to work—was he just going to do the usual men's dance, but on the wrong side?—but when the women turned out their feet and began to *plié,* Charlie joined in, as effortlessly as though he'd been practicing it for weeks. Harvey was so stunned, he actually forgot to start his own

steps, until Shane's fist connected with his arm. *"Dude, pay attention,"* he hissed, and Harvey fell into the familiar steps of the dance.

The steps may have been familiar, but the feeling wasn't. Harvey hadn't counted on how different it would feel to see Charlie's beaming face across the line from him, to take his hand and twirl him around, to move around him in a dance that had endured for decades. To feel, for once, actually a *part* of the dance. He felt a prickling in his eyes that he couldn't entirely pass off as allergies, and found himself mirroring Charlie's radiant smile. Over Charlie's shoulder, he glimpsed Marnie watching them, her hands clasped under her chin and her eyes wet. Scanning quickly, he realized that most of the village was watching him dance with Charlie.

For once, it didn't bother him at all.

The dance wound down as it always did, except that this time, Harvey's eyes were locked on those of his partner, rather than darting nervously around the meadow. Charlie gazed steadily back at him as they bowed to each other; then, as the lines broke and the spectators clapped, Charlie pulled him in for a quick kiss. When they separated, Harvey blurted, "How?"

"Haley taught me," Charlie said, with a mischievous grin. Harvey looked over in shock at Haley, who tossed her long blonde mane and sniffed imperiously.

"I couldn't have him messing it up," she huffed. "It needed to be *perfect."*

Harvey burst out laughing, surprising even himself. Charlie grinned and wrapped his arms around Harvey's middle, and even Haley cracked a smile before flouncing away. Harvey peered down at Charlie, settling his own arm around the farmer's shoulders. "You went to so much trouble," he said. "Why?"

The warmth in Charlie's eyes nearly took Harvey's breath away. "I wanted to dance with you," he said softly, and spectators be damned, Harvey kissed him again. Distantly, he heard someone wolf-whistle—Pam, maybe? He felt a tickle against his temple, and turned his head to see Charlie's flowers brushing him.

"I don't know," Harvey teased, toying with the little spray. "I'm not sure I agree with Haley. These look awfully cute in your hair."

"I thought so, too," Charlie confessed, and they broke into low, furtive giggles. When they subsided, Harvey felt brave enough to ask the question he'd been thinking since Charlie's arrival.

"But you're really okay with this? You don't feel...Well. Never mind." Maybe not brave enough after all.

"Don't feel what?"

"Uh. Emasculated?" Harvey ducked his head, rubbing a hand through his hair. "I mean, it isn't that I think dancing is *for girls,* or anything like that. I just...people have dumb ideas, sometimes, about gay couples. I didn't want you to feel…" Harvey trailed off, unsure how to

finish the sentence and silly with embarrassment. He himself didn't spare a single thought about "gender roles"—he was tall, could lift reasonably heavy things, and possessed a penis, while sobbing at sad movies and really liking cute baby things; all those preconceived ideas about what made a man a man or a woman a woman were just insecure nonsense—but he didn't want Charlie to feel pressured to behave a certain way just because the village was old-fashioned. Charlie raised an eyebrow at him, a glint of mischief in his eye that sent tingles of anticipation down Harvey's spine.

"Oh, darlin'," he drawled, shifting an arm up between Harvey's shoulder blades. His feet shifted, and he pressed forward just slightly; without thinking, Harvey went along with it, letting Charlie dip him backward. "Dancing with you," he purred, as he lowered Harvey toward the grass, "makes me feel very... *very*... manly." He bent over Harvey, his grip never faltering as their chests pressed together over Harvey's pounding heart, and brushed his smirking lips against the doctor's ear. "Let's get out of here, and I'll show you."

He brought Harvey's upper half upright again, but Harvey wasn't sure all of his blood had come back with it. *"Oh,"* he managed, a bit squeakier and less dignified than he would have liked, "yes. Please."

* * * * *

It had been a while, Charlie thought, since he'd had such a calm day. Most of his crops were midway through their growing cycle, so there was nothing to plant or harvest, just basic weeding. He was working his way down the lines of sprinklers, checking to make sure they were all operational, but Maru's engineering seemed to be holding up just fine. Birds chirped from all his fruit trees, hidden among the pink and white blossoms. Even Bones was sleepy, relaxing on the porch and occasionally emitting a dozy *boof*. Charlie thought to himself what a shame it was that Harvey had to spend such a glorious day cooped up in the clinic, but he'd had appointments that morning, so it couldn't be helped.

Over the chatter of the birds, a faint whirr reached his ears. The sound of an ancient truck engine rumbled louder and louder, cutting through the peaceful spring sounds of the farm and making Bones lift his head to investigate. Charlie spun, shielding his eyes to squint into the distance, and dropped his wrench. All of his calm dissipated in an instant.

"Bones!" he all but shrieked, stripping off his gloves and tossing them to the ground. "She's coming! She's here!" Bones was way ahead of him, tearing off to greet the truck in a way that always made Charlie a little nervous. He began picking his own slower way out of the row of cauliflower, careful not to disturb any of the still-fragile plants. Every one he accidentally killed was one he couldn't use to bribe Maru to keep helping him, after all.

By the time he made it to the outer edge of the field, Shane had parked in front of the chicken coop and hopped down from the cab. Charlie ran to him, waving madly. "Did you bring her?" he called, jogging to a stop. Shane snorted, scratching Bones behind the ears.

"Hello to you too," he deadpanned, and Charlie kicked a clod of dirt at him.

"Come on, come on, you *know* I'm not patient," he wheedled, and Shane reached behind him into the truck. He emerged with a small cardboard box, holes punched haphazardly into its

sides; a faint peeping floated through the holes, and Charlie nearly swooned.

“And she’s really—”

“She is.”

They opened the box, both craning their necks to peer reverently in, and Charlie let out an involuntary, “Oh my *god.”* In the back of his mind, he remembered reading an article about a study on “cute aggression,” that weird impulse where something was so fucking adorable you wanted to just *bite it* or *smush it* or whatever. Staring down into the box, Charlie understood that impulse. Nestled into the bottom, so cute he wanted to squeeze her, was a little chick—with a curly tail and electric-blue down.

“Genes are some weird shit, man,” Shane remarked, his hushed tone at odds with the crude words. “I still don’t really know where this came from, but every eight or ten chicks, one of them comes out blue.”

Charlie reached into the box, lifting the chick as gently as he could between his hands. She was a little older than his current flock had been when he’d taken them home; he hadn’t wanted to introduce her to the Spice Girls and Pizza until she could establish herself in the pecking order. (And privately, though he loved Pizza, he’d wanted to be sure of getting a *female* chicken—one rooster was quite enough, thank you.) He raised her to eye level, where she peeped and regarded him with what he thought was an imperious gaze.

“Gonna name her after some other 90s pop star?”

“No, she’s special,” Charlie replied, shaking his head. “She needs something one of a kind.”

“Can’t argue with you there.”

They made their way into the coop, Charlie cradling the chick against his chest. The thought of introducing this new baby to his girls, who were so much bigger and more boisterous, was a scary one. But Shane had assured him she’d be all right, once everyone had some time to get used to each other. The flock had mostly headed outside to graze for the day; only Pizza was in the coop, taking a post-lunch nap on a high perch. Charlie crept quietly to the opposite corner, kneeling and setting the newcomer down behind a makeshift fence he’d built out of some scrap wood. He wanted to give her at least a little space of her own while she adjusted to her new home.

Of course, the minute he put her down, she let out her loudest peep yet, and Pizza startled awake with a little squawk. Turning his head to glare at them, he rustled his feathers indignantly.

“Don’t be such a drama queen, P,” Charlie called, shuffling to the side. “Come see the baby.” With a few jerky, uncoordinated movements, Pizza hopped down from his perch and crossed the coop toward them. Charlie held his breath as the rooster approached the fence; the new baby stood right up against it, poking her head through, and he was terrified that Pizza would attack her. But Shane watched with a relaxed posture, and Charlie tried to let that reassure

him. Shane loved the chickens, after all. If there was real danger, he'd be the first to tell Charlie about it.

When Pizza reached the fence, he dropped his head down to the chick's eye level, turning back and forth to stare at her with both eyes. The chick peeped shyly—or so it seemed to Charlie, who still didn't really speak chicken, beyond the scream Pizza usually leveled at Bones which was a clear *FUCK OFF AND DIE—* and hopped a little, scratching at the floor. There was a long, tense moment, where Charlie's hands itched to snatch the fragile baby out of harm's way. Then, Pizza let out a series of soft, gentle clucks. It was such an un-Pizza-like sound that Charlie instinctively looked around for whatever hen had gotten back into the coop.

"He likes her," Shane said, *almost* smiling. "That's pretty rare. Roosters don't usually pay much attention to chicks."

"My beautiful son," Charlie mock-sobbed. "He's such a gentle soul."

"Right. Tell that to your dog."

All at once, Pizza hopped up on the fence, and Charlie's hands shot out to pull him back. Shane stopped him, grabbing him by the wrist. "Wait it out," he said. "Give them a minute. We can always pull him out if he gets aggressive."

Charlie's protective instincts didn't like it, but he listened; if the baby was going to join the flock, she was going to have to make friends *sometime.* Pizza dropped heavily into the enclosure, and the moment his feet touched the floor, the blue chick ran to him, peeping madly. Pizza fluffed up at his full height, a look of chickeny bewilderment on his face, and Charlie stood by to intervene. But after a moment, he settled back down, seemingly content to let the baby cuddle against his feet. In an instant, Charlie's heart stopped seizing in terror and melted out of his chest.

"Oh my god," he said, for the second time that day. "This is the *cutest."*

"Charlie's the cutest," Shane countered, "but it's a close second."

"You're so sweet, but you know, you don't have to talk about me in the third person."

"Yoba, I knew that name was a mistake. *Please* shut the fuck up."

Pizza had begun to peck idly at the ground, the baby dozing against his bulk, and Charlie was filled with a sudden, deep sense of peace. In another life, he might have watched this kind of adorable thing on YouTube in his cubicle; now he lived it every day. His Joja days felt like ancient history, like a bad dream he'd vividly remembered but that had, at last, begun to fade. Gratitude washing over him, he leaned to the side, resting his shoulder against Shane's in companionable silence as they watched the two chickens.

"Um," came a voice from behind them a moment later, making Charlie jump out of his skin, "hi?"

He spun around, heart hammering, to see Harvey standing uncertainly in the coop doorway, Bones nosing at the backs of his legs. “V! You scared me!” He hopped to his feet, crossing the small space to kiss Harvey hello; Harvey was oddly stiff, not putting his arms around Charlie as he usually did. Did he feel awkward in front of Shane, Charlie wondered? He wasn’t always comfortable with PDA. “I wasn’t expecting you home until dinner! Did something happen?”

“I finished up all my appointments,” Harvey explained, glancing past him at Shane, “so I thought I would come home early, since it’s such a nice day. Hi, Shane,” he added. Shane nodded at him in greeting, already turning back to the chickens.

“Oh, awesome!” He ran his fingers down Harvey’s arm, catching his hand, and tugged him toward the makeshift enclosure. “Shane and I were just settling in the new blue baby. Want to come meet her?”

Harvey hesitated, which set off alarm bells in Charlie’s head. It was completely unlike him to not rush to a baby animal, or to not show an interest in Charlie’s work. “I don’t want to crowd her,” he said, and gave Charlie a quick smile that didn’t quite reach his eyes. “I’ll come back in and introduce myself later, once she’s had some time to settle.”

“Oh, okay,” Charlie replied, confused. “That’s fine. Are you hungry? Do you want to have lunch? I can take a break for a while, if you want.”

“No, no, don’t let me interrupt,” Harvey insisted, and Charlie still couldn’t read his tone. “Go ahead. I’m just going to catch up on some reading. I hardly ever have time to keep up with medical journals,” he said, gesturing feebly toward the door.

Something was wrong, Charlie could feel it. All of his instincts told him not to let Harvey wander off and bury himself in his journals, but whatever was going on, he knew his boyfriend wouldn’t appreciate having it dragged out in front of Shane. “Well...okay,” he said finally, offering up his own awkward smile. “I’ll just be a little longer, all right? Then I’ll come find you and we can grab something to eat.”

“Yes. Good.” Harvey cleared his throat, then squeezed Charlie’s hand before dropping it. “Take your time. Goodbye, Shane,” he added, a little louder; Shane waved over his shoulder without turning around. With one final glance, Harvey turned and left the coop, closing the door behind him. It was for the best, probably; Charlie did have more work to do before lunch, and he couldn’t leave the new chick alone with Pizza just yet.

He just wished he knew why Harvey had looked at him like that.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry this is coming so late in the day! The weekend got away from me. Thanks again to everyone who's left comments, they've been so encouraging!

I wanted to find a way to explain the canon that your farmer always dances opposite their partner's "original" side, no matter what gender they are. I thought my male farmer was super cute dancing with Harvey in-game (although it always annoyed me that you don't get the nice clothes everyone else gets!).

Tomorrow: angst. A lot of it.

Chapter 18: Spring, Year 2

Chapter Summary

> Harvey frets. Charlie tries to force a friendship, with mixed results. Charlie gives someone a gift, and someone else takes notice.

Chapter Notes

> I mentioned it yesterday, but we're heading into some pretty angsty territory today. There is NSFW content in this chapter, and someone making sort of poor sexual decisions (there is NO dub- or non-con, everything is totally consensual! Just a bit ill-advised). Just a heads up!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It surprised Harvey to learn, nearly forty years into his life, that pink might be his favorite color. He'd always thought it was green: leaves, grass, pickles, the *Memphis Belle* B-17 bomber, the jacket that Maru had once told him brought out his eyes and which he now wore every day. But coming around the last bend in the path between town and home, watching the riot of cherry blossoms around the farmhouse come into view, he thought their color was the most beautiful he'd ever seen—made only more lovely by how fleeting and ephemeral it was. (He had the thought that it reminded him of Charlie's blush, there and gone in an instant, brilliant pink. He then had the thought that his blood sugar was probably low, if he was getting this horribly sappy in the middle of the afternoon.)

Bones bounded up to him as he always did, brandishing a slobbery stick; Harvey scratched him behind the ears before wrestling it away from him and flinging it as hard as he could. The dog tore after it, barking madly, and disappeared behind the shed. Harvey took a moment on his way in to refill his water bowl—it was warming up more every day, he wouldn't want poor Bones to get dehydrated. He climbed the steps to the front door absently, mulling over the day's patients and hoping Marnie was resting like he'd instructed her to.

"Hi, honey," he called as he stepped inside, kicking off his dusty shoes. For a moment, it didn't quite register, but then he realized that the house was totally silent—no Charlie humming in the kitchen or reading on the couch—and there was no smell of coffee, which was highly unusual. These days, Charlie usually had to work until dark, pausing only to eat dinner. Harvey always made the first batch of coffee in the morning before leaving for the clinic, and Charlie always made another around 3 PM, to get him through what he called "the cricket hours."

“Char?” he called, poking his head into the bedroom, glancing at the open bathroom door. He returned to the living room, planning to head back outside and search for him there, when a piece of paper on the kitchen table caught his eye. He recognized Charlie’s blocky scrawl from ten feet away.

#1—Marnie’s sick (you probably know) and Shane can’t run the ranch by himself. Going over there to help with the animals. I’ll try to be home by dinnertime. xoxo Charlie

Well, there was that mystery solved. Marnie *had* come into the clinic, something he generally had to pester and wheedle and beg her to do. It was nothing serious, a simple upper respiratory infection, but he’d given her strict orders not to do any farm work for a few days. She had accepted this without protest, a sign of how bad she really felt.

He moved into the kitchen to start making dinner; if Charlie came home soon, he’d surely be hungry, and if he didn’t, Harvey was hungry anyway. There was a messy bundle of brown paper in the refrigerator, which turned out to contain two fillets of fresh trout—Charlie had gone fishing first thing in the morning, sleepily mumbling something about a new bait. Harvey pulled it out, along with some herbs and vegetables Charlie had grown, and got to work cooking.

Harvey wondered if Shane had taken off work at JojaMart to stay home and do Marnie’s chores. He sometimes marveled at the amount Marnie was able to do alone; the woman was a force of nature, generally one of his healthiest patients. Shane did help around the place, he knew, but his job had to make it difficult to keep up with everything that needed doing. It was objectively good, he knew, that Charlie had gone over to help him. That was the kind of man Charlie was: helpful, dependable, always the first to lend a hand, and Harvey loved him for it. He was glad Charlie was helping on the ranch. He wasn’t even jealous or anxious.

Well. Maybe just the tiniest bit, but not *very,* not enough to matter.

He certainly wasn’t thinking about how he’d found them in the chicken coop, leaning on each other and laughing. Of course not. He wasn’t snapping the ends off the green beans while dwelling on the way Charlie had casually used Shane’s shoulder to push himself up to standing. He wasn’t spiraling into some kind of elaborate Edwardian nightmare where Charlie helped Shane groom a glistening horse and Shane took more notice of the handsome stablehand. Just because they were friends, close friends, friends who cuddled in the chicken coop and hung out all day while Harvey was busy, didn’t mean they were definitely going to fall in love and raise oddly-colored chickens together.

“Yoba, *stop,”* Harvey ground out, dropping his forehead against one of the upper cabinets with a dull *clunk.* Honestly, he was being ridiculous, and he knew it. Charlie was allowed to have friends, even handsome friends. And Shane needed him, and Harvey needed to be secure enough to trust them. Charlie was not Philip. He wasn’t. He *wasn’t.* Driving himself insane with worst-case scenarios was not a healthy way for Harvey to live.

It was just that he’d forgotten how it felt to have something to *lose.* He’d wanted Charlie to be his boyfriend with a single-minded, desperate focus, and he hadn’t considered how his own old wounds would flare up once he resumed actually using his heart for something besides pumping blood. Solitude had been lonely and dull, but it had been safe, in that bleak

sort of *War Games* way: *the only winning move is not to play.* With Charlie, Harvey was achingly, deliriously happy, falling more in love every day, but he was also excruciatingly aware that most falls had a landing somewhere. He recognized that by obsessing over Charlie's every interaction with Shane, he'd been bracing for the impact.

He needed a distraction. Rifling through the cupboards, he located an ancient cookbook, one of those standard-issue sixties homemaker types with a gingham cover. Inside, he found a faded recipe for béarnaise sauce, and it looked tricky enough to occupy his horrible brain for a while. He dug out the butter and eggs and got to work.

Thirty minutes later, Harvey sat down with his delicious-smelling plate of fish. He thought he'd done everything just about perfectly, the trout resting in a shallow pool of creamy yellow sauce. For a moment he wondered if he should wait for Charlie, but he had no idea when he'd be returning, and Harvey was starving. Reluctantly, he tucked into the fish. *Yoba,* that was good; he needed to put more effort into cooking, if this was what he'd get out of it. He'd been thinking he should step up his game a bit anyway, since Charlie was such an (apparently effortlessly) good cook. The only thing off about the meal was Charlie's absence. Since they'd moved in together, they rarely ate dinner separately, and he found he didn't like it; eating alone reminded him of the years B.C. (Before Charlie), when he'd eaten *every* meal by himself. Bones occasionally grumbled at him from beneath the table, but he wasn't the best conversationalist.

Just as he was finishing his food, he heard heavy, tired-sounding footsteps climbing the porch stairs. Charlie came through the door a moment later, disheveled from head to toe: straw in his hair, mud on his boots (oh, Yoba, it *was* mud, wasn't it?), dust over every inch of his clothes. He looked utterly exhausted, but when he caught Harvey's eye, he smiled as widely as ever.

"Hi, darlin'," he said, pulling off his boots. "Sorry I'm late."

"It's okay." Harvey stood with his empty plate, depositing it on the counter as he crossed the distance between them. He'd intended to hug him, but Charlie gave an apologetic grimace at the state of his clothes, and he settled for kissing him on the forehead instead. "Rough day at Marnie's? You look like you fell in a sty."

"That's not that far from the truth," Charlie groaned, then sniffed the air. "Whatever you're eating, it smells amazing. Didn't save me any, did you?"

"I did. Let's see if Bones left it alone."

When he'd gotten Charlie settled with his fish and a glass of wine, Harvey sat across from him, reaching over to pick a straw out of his hair. "So…"

"Ranching is *hard.* I literally don't know how Marnie does it. Is she a secret witch?" Charlie took a bite of trout off his fork, then looked up at Harvey, eyes wide. "Wait, are *you?* How have you not made this before?"

“I had some time to kill and one of your old cookbooks. Thought I’d give it a try.”

“Witchcraft,” Charlie declared, shoveling another bite into his mouth. He ate in silence for a moment, Harvey content to drink his wine and scratch Bones behind the ears, and then picked back up where he’d left off. “Every day Marnie has to feed the chickens, clean the coop, feed and milk the cows, feed and shear the sheep, feed the pigs, feed and groom the horses, feed the rabbits, feed and milk the goats, and muck *all* the stalls. I thought watering my crops was a pain in the ass.”

“Not in a rush to build a barn anytime soon?”

“I didn’t say *that.”* Charlie finished his food with a near-orgasmic sound, then leaned back in the chair with his eyes closed. “God. I could go to sleep right here.”

“You’d regret that in the morning,” Harvey said, nudging his foot under the table. “And I don’t mean to be rude, my dear, but I think it’s probably for the best if you take a shower before bed.”

“I’m *hurt,”* Charlie sighed, but he got up and shuffled off to the bedroom.

Harvey looked up from his book as the bathroom door opened. Charlie padded into the bedroom, naked but for a towel, rubbing a hand through his damp hair. He noticed Harvey looking at him and cracked a smile, lifting his chin. “Enjoying the view?”

“Immensely.”

Charlie flopped into bed, dropping the wet towel carelessly onto the floor, and burrowed under the covers; Harvey set his book aside and reached for him, pulling him into his arms. They lay like that for a moment, Harvey savoring the feel of Charlie’s warm skin, soft under his hands. When Charlie shifted, pressing his face into the pillow, Harvey inhaled deeply at the base of his neck.

“You smell good,” he whispered, his interest stirring.

“Not like barn anymore?”

“Not remotely.” Harvey’s lips found Charlie’s skin, kissing down the back of his neck, dipping between his shoulder blades. Charlie sighed contentedly, but when Harvey moved to bring their hips into alignment—Charlie’s back to his front was giving him ideas—Charlie pulled minutely away, turning toward him.

“Oh, darlin’, I’m sorry,” he murmured, and Harvey felt suddenly very awake. “I want to, but I’m so tired. Can we try again tomorrow?”

“Oh—of course, okay,” Harvey said, trying not to sound as surprised as he felt. Charlie smiled at him and whispered his *good night* and *I love you,* and Harvey was sure he said them back, but his mind was racing again. It wasn’t that he wouldn’t get to have sex that night—he was nowhere near that shallow; he could go without for more than a day, and at any rate, it

wasn't as though Charlie *owed* it to him. But Charlie had never, not once, in over six months, turned him down. Not after fourteen-hour days on the farm; not after minor injuries or hauling rocks or cutting down trees all day. Every time Harvey had shown an interest, Charlie had been right there with him. So what was different about today?

There was an answer in Harvey's head, but he wasn't going to let himself think it.

The sky had turned pink before he fell asleep.

* * * * *

"Pizza for you!" Emily chirped, depositing the steaming platter on their table. Charlie inhaled appreciatively, and across from him, Shane made a sound of deep longing; he hadn't set foot in the Stardrop since that awful night on the cliff. Tonight, flanked by Charlie, Marnie, and Harvey, he'd felt strong enough to go back.

"Is it as beautiful as you remembered?" Charlie teased, and Shane lifted a slice onto his plate, eyes on the long pulls of cheese.

"It's *better,"* he declared, and took a bite, hot enough that the roof of Charlie's mouth twinged in sympathy. How he could even taste it, Charlie didn't know.

Slices distributed, they returned to their previous topic of conversation, a well-worn one by now. "I'm telling you," Shane said around a mouthful of melted cheese, "if you want to get good at *Super Strike Sisters,* you gotta buy your own console and practice. And stop playing Princess Momo, she sucks."

"You watch your mouth! That's *royalty* you're talking about."

Marnie had wanted to take Shane and Charlie out as thanks for helping on the ranch while she was sick. They'd both assured her it wasn't necessary, but she'd insisted, so here they were. It was *nice,* just being out with friends and eating pizza, a totally normal Friday night. Charlie didn't begrudge Shane his recovery at all, but it was difficult to go out to eat when the only restaurant in town also happened to be the bar where Shane's drinking problem had turned the corner into full-blown alcoholism. Charlie and Harvey still went by themselves, of course, but he'd missed spending time as a group. In fact, they'd never really done much of that in the first place; Shane and Harvey barely knew each other, really. Even Charlie had to admit they seemed like unlikely friends—the kind, shy doctor and the grouchy, sarcastic gamer—but he loved them both, and he was determined that would be enough.

"Do you play video games, Harvey?" Marnie asked, rolling her eyes fondly at Shane. To Charlie's left, Harvey smiled and shook his head, spearing a bite of salad on his fork.

"Never got to play when I was a kid," he said ruefully. "And never really had the time to pick them up as an adult. I think if I tried now, I'd either be totally abysmal or end up getting so obsessed I'd lose my job."

"Mm, you could always help me on the farm then," Charlie suggested, batting his eyelashes at Harvey. The doctor laughed, nudging him with his knee.

“With as much trouble as you get into? Someone needs to keep a medical license around here.”

Shane pulled him back into conversation then, laying out the technical intricacies of executing a perfect Super Strike, and Charlie found himself getting caught up in it. Harvey hadn’t moved his knee, leaving it pressed against his under the table; Charlie felt very content, with his boyfriend beside him and his best friend chattering away. They worked their way through the pizza, then decided to follow it up with pie. Shane segued into a long anecdote about Charlie-the-chicken befriending one of the calves, and Charlie-the-human told him about how his blue chicken was doing.

“Blue Ivy? I thought you weren’t going to name her after a pop star!”

“I didn’t! Blue Ivy is a pop star’s *child.”*

Ten minutes into their bickering about the importance of chicken names, Marnie stifled a yawn, stretching. “Boys,” she managed, “it’s been lovely, but I need to be getting to bed. The animals get up early, you know.”

“To bed?” Charlie repeated, startled, and looked at his watch. “Whoa! How is it almost nine thirty? We’ve been here for almost three hours!”

“I can walk you home, Marnie,” Harvey offered.

“Oh, we’ll all go,” Charlie protested, and picked up his jacket to help Harvey into it. “By the time we walk back to the farm it’ll be past my bedtime, anyway.”

“This isn’t over, farm boy,” Shane grumbled, tossing his napkin on the table. “You’d better get brainstorming chicken names.”

They said their goodbyes, calling out to Emily and Gus as they left, and headed into the brisk night. Shane and Marnie headed for the south road that would take them home, while Charlie and Harvey headed to the north road. They walked with their fingers loosely intertwined, Charlie enjoying the cool breeze. After talking for so long, he didn’t mind walking in silence, and he assumed Harvey felt the same.

Although, come to think of it, had Harvey actually talked that much?

...Had he talked to Shane at all?

Charlie had been vaguely aware of him chatting to Marnie, and had assumed they’d been deep in conversation, but now he realized that he’d been so busy arguing with Shane about chickens and video games, he hadn’t even checked in on his boyfriend. Some date he was. “Hey,” he ventured, nudging his shoulder against Harvey’s. “Did you have a good time?”

“Oh, yes,” Harvey said, a little too quickly. “Marnie’s very nice.”

“Yeah, she is.” He paused, unsure how to phrase his next question without seeming pushy. “You didn’t talk to Shane much, huh?”

“No, I guess not.”

Harvey didn’t seem inclined to elaborate, which wasn’t like him; he wasn’t the most talkative guy in the world, but he usually didn’t clam up when Charlie was trying to have a conversation. A tiny frisson of anxiety went through Charlie’s stomach. “Um,” he began, already dreading the answer, “dumb question, but do you..not like Shane?”

Harvey was quiet for a long moment. Charlie had learned long ago to let him compose his thoughts, but it was still an agonizing wait. What was he going to do, if his boyfriend hated his closest friend? He supposed lots of people split their time between separate groups of friends, but he didn’t want that, wanted Harvey to be involved in every part of his life. At last, Harvey took a deep breath. “It’s not that,” he said quietly. “I like him fine, it’s just...well…”

“Just...?”

Harvey gestured, dropping Charlie’s hand to wave both of his around helplessly. “You two know each other so well,” he said, ducking his head. “And you have so much in common. It’s...kind of hard to find a way into the conversation.” He turned to glance at Charlie, shamefaced. “You didn’t do anything wrong. It’s just me. I don’t know how to talk to people like you do.”

“Oh, sweetheart,” Charlie murmured, feeling the guilt creep in. “I’m sorry. I got too caught up in what we were talking about. I should have paid more attention to you.”

“No! I mean—that’s—you don’t have to babysit me,” he protested, and even in the semidarkness Charlie could tell his face was flaming. “You deserve to spend time with your friends. I was fine. It’s fine.” He took a deep breath, shaking his head. “I’ll try harder next time.”

“I know he seems scary, but he’s really nice,” Charlie said, catching his hand again. “He just takes a while to warm up to people. Hell, sometimes I wonder how much he likes *me.* He still only ever calls me ‘farm boy.’ I’ve never figured out if it’s supposed to be an insult or not.”

“I doubt it,” Harvey said, oddly quietly. They walked in silence for a few more minutes, Charlie still contemplating how he could (gently, lovingly) force two people into becoming friends. The only thing he knew they had in common was liking Charlie’s cooking. Well, maybe he could work with that.

“Hey, I have an idea!” he exclaimed, squeezing Harvey’s hand. “Why don’t I invite Shane over to the house for dinner? I’ll cook and we can all hang out and talk. Not about video games, I promise.”

He thought it was a perfect solution: a small group, on their home turf, a low-pressure situation for Harvey. But Harvey didn’t answer right away, and Charlie felt a twinge of disappointment. “Sure,” he said at last, smiling briefly. It reminded Charlie of the face he’d made in the chicken coop, and he didn’t like it any better now than he had then. “Whatever you’d like.”

“Is that okay?” Charlie pressed, feeling wrong-footed. “We don’t have to. I mean, you don’t have to be friends with him at all if you don’t want to,” he added, deflating a little. “I can just hang out with him on my own.”

“No, it’s a great idea,” Harvey said hastily, and yet again, Charlie wondered what he’d said wrong. “Invite him over. Anytime.”

“...Okay. I will.” Harvey glanced at him, lifting Charlie’s hand to his lips and pressing a kiss to the knuckles, and Charlie felt the anxious weight in his stomach lift a little. Whatever was going on with Harvey—and he was determined to find out—at least he was still being affectionate. Charlie smiled at him, pouring all the warmth he could into it, and thought of the surprise he’d been brewing in the shed. If Harvey needed cheering up, maybe it was just about time to show him.

* * * * *

A sliver of moonlight crept through the curtains of the farmhouse window, falling across Charlie’s sleeping face. Harvey lay facing him, admiring the silvered fan of his lashes against his cheekbones, the way his curls spilled over his eyes. Tentatively, he reached out a hand, tracing a finger down Charlie’s jawline. Charlie stirred, ever so slightly, but then just burrowed further into his pillow with the tiniest hint of a smile on his face. The sight made Harvey’s chest ache with tenderness. He was so beautiful, Harvey thought, so precious and lovely. Harvey could lie awake every night of his life gazing at him and still never get his fill.

And Harvey was lying awake more often than not these days, because his traitorous brain wouldn’t switch off at night. It monologued for hours, the scenery changing but the script always the same: *you’re going to lose him. You’re not good enough. Look at all the time he spends with Shane. Those two make sense; you’re only getting in the way, old man.*

He fought it down as best he could, but down in the deepest part of his heart, he couldn’t deny that Shane and Charlie looked good together. They were much more similar in age, Shane only a year older; closer in height, too, only separated by a few inches. Shane wasn’t quite as handsome as Charlie—as far as Harvey was concerned, no one was—but he had the kind of easy, disheveled good looks that Harvey knew would only get better with age. No one would look at the two of them and wonder what Charlie was doing with Shane, the way Harvey assumed they did with him. And Shane made Charlie laugh, made him smile, made him happy. Now that Shane was getting a handle on his depression, the two of them were closer than ever. Watching them at dinner yesterday, bickering playfully and totally absorbed in their conversation, had been all the confirmation Harvey needed of that.

Harvey no longer really worried that Charlie would leave him. (Mostly.) He knew Charlie loved him, and that he was a good man, someone who kept his word. He wouldn’t hurt Harvey if he could possibly help it. But that didn’t mean it was the right thing to do. It was one thing for Charlie to settle into a relationship with Harvey when he’d just moved to town and didn’t know anyone yet; it was another thing to commit himself to Harvey for the long haul. If Charlie was regretting his choice of partner, if his heart had started to drift elsewhere, could Harvey really ask him to stay? Could Harvey be happy, never knowing if Charlie was?

Charlie let out a soft sigh in his sleep, drawing Harvey's attention back to the present moment, and suddenly the inches between them on the bed felt like too much distance. He rolled closer, draping himself half over Charlie's warm body, drinking in the feel of his skin. Harvey knew he shouldn't wake him; Charlie had been to the mines today, he was tired, but he was desperate for Charlie's eyes on him. He needed to hear his voice, feel that body under his hands, reassure himself that they still had this—at least for now. Pressing closer, he kissed gently up the side of Charlie's neck, tasting his sleep-warmed skin. As his hands roamed, Charlie cracked an eye open, squirming slightly.

"Hi," he murmured, his voice rough and thick from sleep.

"I'm sorry," Harvey whispered, face tucked into Charlie's neck. "I needed you."

"Bad dream?"

"Something like that."

Charlie rolled onto his back, pulling Harvey into his arms as he went, and Harvey shivered at the feeling of Charlie's hands sliding up his back. "I'm here," Charlie whispered, and Harvey stretched up to kiss him, to hide the lump that had come to his throat. The kiss started gently, just a chaste press of lips, but after a few moments Harvey deepened it. As his tongue brushed Charlie's, the farmer let out a small noise of surprise, and he pulled back a little. "Are you…"

Harvey's face burned, but he couldn't bring himself to stop. "Is that okay?"

"Always," Charlie replied, and slid his hands down to Harvey's hips. Harvey slipped his own hand up under Charlie's shirt, feeling the warmth of him, the way the skin shifted over his muscles as he moved. They'd been together for seven months, had come together in this way probably hundreds of times, but Harvey knew he would never get enough of it. Even through the haze of his misery, he felt as intoxicated by Charlie as ever.

"What do you need?" Charlie whispered, arching up a little as Harvey's fingers found a nipple. Harvey didn't respond, just sucked a mark into Charlie's collarbone as he touched him. He didn't know how to communicate *you, just you, any way I can have you, forever* without sounding as pathetic and needy as he felt. Charlie let out a soft gasp, squirming beneath him, as Harvey hooked fingers into his waistband and pulled.

"V," he breathed, and Harvey slid down to take him in his mouth. Charlie's callused, gentle fingers threaded into his hair, not pulling, just stroking as though Harvey were something precious. Harvey wanted so badly to believe it. He wanted to let himself bask in Charlie's affection, his whispered endearments and murmured promises, without his own self-loathing blowing in like a chill breeze. He wanted to drop the last shreds of his defenses, to feel invincible in the face of Charlie's love, but he couldn't. Taking Charlie apart little by little, listening to him pant and gasp and curse above, all he could think was *how much longer? How many more times do I have, until you realize you can do better?*

If Harvey were a different person, a braver person, he would lift his head and talk to Charlie. Explain the hundred-pound weight of his anxiety, the brick that kept him drowning no matter

how hard he kicked out. He would lay out the reasons he didn't feel good enough for Charlie and let his lover refute them, and Charlie *would,* he was almost sure of it. But the part of him that clutched the brick with white knuckles—the part that played back his past at night, whispering to him about his uncle and Philip and everyone else who'd obviously seen him for what he really was—it kept him bowed over Charlie's body, giving himself like an offering. He *loved* sex with Charlie, really he did, but this time felt less about pleasure than penance: a token of apology for asking Charlie to keep loving something Harvey himself felt to be essentially unlovable.

He hadn't realized he was crying until a teardrop hit the back of his hand, and he prayed Charlie wouldn't notice. Fortunately, the dark obscured his face, and Charlie took his harsh intake of breath as a gasp of pleasure. "God, V, the things you do to me," came his voice from above, breathy and just barely strained; he was getting close. "You're so good, so good, can I —please—"

Harvey moaned around him, hoping it would convey his permission, since he didn't trust his voice. Charlie's hips were shaking with the effort of holding still, and then with one last bob of his head Harvey's mouth flooded. Charlie thrust up into his heat as he came, just a little, a low and wordless sound of ecstasy. Harvey swallowed it all down, past the constriction in his throat, keeping it up until he knew Charlie must be getting sensitive. Reluctantly, he pulled back, squeezing his eyes tightly shut in an effort to stop the tears.

"That was incredible," Charlie whispered, fingers running gently through his hair again. "God. Anytime you want to wake me up for *that,* go right ahead."

Harvey chuckled, hoping it didn't sound too wet. "Noted."

And then Charlie's hands were reaching down toward him, ready to pull him up and reciprocate, and Harvey panicked; he wasn't even hard, caught up in his spiraling emotions. In one smooth motion, he dodged Charlie's grasp, sliding up beside him on the bed. He pulled Charlie's back against his own chest, spooning him and pressing kisses to his hair.

"Harvey? What do you—"

"I'm sorry for waking you up," Harvey interrupted gently, tracing his fingers along Charlie's clavicle. "We should sleep."

"But—what about you?" He tried to turn around in Harvey's arms, but Harvey clutched him closer, hoping he'd interpret it as sleepy clinginess rather than evasion. "I can't just leave you high and dry, darlin'."

"You're not. Don't worry. I'm just tired," Harvey insisted, and it wasn't a lie; he felt a bone-deep exhaustion, suddenly. "Rain check?"

Charlie shifted, getting comfortable; his energy was not the usual loose, boneless post-orgasmic calm, but something a little uneasy. Harvey hated that he'd ruined even the afterglow. "Okay," he said, almost a question, "if you're sure."

"I'm sure. Get some sleep."

“Love you, Harvey.”

“I love you, too.”

* * * * *

“So where’s Dr. Boyfriend again?” Shane asked, stuffing another hunk of pretzel into his mouth. Charlie was glad he seemed to feel comfortable in the Stardrop again, though he also wished he felt a little *less* comfortable talking with his mouth full.

“Watching over Elliott. He came in covered in hives earlier, Harvey had to give him an antihistamine injection. He’s OK now, but it makes you sleepy, so I guess Harvey has to stay with him until he wakes up.”

“Ah, Jas had to do that once. Almonds. It was scary as hell.”

“Yeah, I bet. Oh! Speaking of Jas.” Charlie ducked down to his backpack, tugging a bundle of daffodils out of the side pocket. “These are for her. I know she likes them, and I always pass a million of them on my way into town.” He held them out, and was rewarded with one of Shane’s rare, genuine smiles.

“Thanks,” Shane said, taking them. “She’ll be really happy. I’m going to take credit, of course.”

“Of course,” Charlie intoned, rolling his eyes. “She won’t believe you anyway.”

They were silent for a moment, picking at their snacks, and then Shane glanced up at him from under his bangs. “Hey,” he ventured, in a voice that instantly brought Charlie to attention, “you okay? You’re kinda quiet.”

“Yeah,” Charlie answered immediately, and then sighed. “Mostly. I don’t know. Harvey’s been...a little weird, lately. Sad, seems like, but I don’t know why.”

“Before you came along, I always figured he was depressed,” Shane said, shrugging. “I mean, takes one to know one.”

“That’s the thing, I don’t think he is? Or, maybe...It just comes and goes. He seems totally fine one minute and then super distant the next. Doesn’t seem like he wants to talk about it.” Charlie suddenly felt a pang of guilt, discussing Harvey’s private feelings. “You know what, forget it. I shouldn’t be talking about it, either.” He sighed, fiddling with the straw in his soda. “You want to come over for dinner sometime soon? I want you guys to have a chance to talk.”

“Talk?” Shane blinked at him, as though he’d suggested Shane join the circus. “Why?”

“Because you’re my friend, and he’s my boyfriend, and it would be nice if you two liked each other?”

“I like him,” Shane protested. “I don’t see why that means we have to *talk.”*

“Humor me,” Charlie sighed. “I’ll make pepper poppers.”

“Sold.”

* * * * *

Was Harvey embarrassed to take part in a weekly aerobics/jazzercise class, in which he never managed to complete even one of the steps correctly? Yes, he was. But he was more embarrassed of the things that happened to his body if he didn’t make even a token effort to exercise, so here he was. Caroline had promised him earlier in the week that they’d be doing Zumba this week, which he secretly kind of loved, so he’d actually been looking forward to it.

Most of his classmates had arrived already, milling around and chatting with each other. Leah and Marnie discussed the spring peepers that had returned to the lake near their houses; Robin listened as Emily described a new kind of crystal she’d recently acquired. Harvey always tried to slip into class unnoticed, so he made his way along the wall to the back. Jodi and Caroline stood close together, speaking in hushed tones. Inwardly, he gave a sigh. Their appetite for gossip was well-documented (Pierre’s was just as bad—Harvey suspected that was the major thing that had drawn him and Caroline together), and it always made him uncomfortable to overhear it. He moved to shuffle past as quickly as he could without attracting their attention.

“—wasn’t even hiding it, just put it out there like it was no big deal,” Jodi was saying, eyes on Marnie, while Caroline put a hand over her mouth. Whoever they were talking about, it was apparently the juiciest tidbit of the day.

“I have to admit, I would have thought better of him. Unless—did he and Doctor Harvey break up?”

Harvey’s head jerked up as ice flooded his veins. Were they talking about *Charlie?* Why would anyone think they’d broken up? Why would— “Sorry, couldn’t help overhearing,” he said loudly as he approached, not particularly sorry; Jodi jumped a mile, and Caroline looked distinctly uncomfortable. “Were you talking about Charlie?”

“Um, well, yes,” Jodi admitted, and though her face was red, Harvey knew she was eager to get more details from an inside source. “Is everything all right at home?”

“It’s fine, thank you,” he said, a bit coldly. “What were you saying before? About…” He trailed off, waving his hands, and Jodi and Caroline shared a dark look. His heart rate had jumped into overdrive, and if one of them didn’t start explaining soon, he was going to lose his mind.

At last, Jodi sighed. “I hate to be the one to tell you this,” she said gravely, though of course she *didn’t* hate it, she lived for this kind of thing, “but I saw Charlie giving Shane a gift at the Stardrop last night.”

At Harvey’s blank expression, Caroline added, “A bouquet of flowers.”

Harvey didn't understand. "Flowers," he repeated, feeling his brain struggle to catch up.

Jodi and Caroline glanced at each other again, and Jodi ventured, "Yes, you know…" and suddenly it all clicked into place. Charlie had given Shane *flowers.*

It was funny. With a scene from his literal nightmares playing out in real life, Harvey would have expected his throat to constrict, his eyes to burn, his breath to catch. Instead, he felt a leaden calm settle over him, a sense of something inevitable having come to pass. The only thought that went clearly through his mind was: I will never be as happy again as I was ten seconds ago. Every question that had plagued him for the past month was being answered; there had been a lonely Before Charlie, and then a heavenly With Charlie, and now there would be an unbearable After Charlie. He felt the loss acutely, as though it was already over, as though Charlie had already asked him to pack his things and go back to his apartment.

"Doctor Harvey? Are you okay?" Caroline asked tentatively, from what felt like very far away. He made a face—it had been meant to be reassuring, but he honestly had no idea what his actual features did—and nodded, suddenly lightheaded.

"Don't think I'll be joining you today, actually," he managed, in a voice he could barely hear over the blood rushing in his ears. "Take care."

Both women were talking to him now, in tones of concern, but he lurched for the door. He had to leave. He had to get out of there, had to go—where? Back home? Charlie was at home, and the thought of seeing him filled Harvey with panic. The clinic; he could make it to the clinic. He rushed through Pierre's store, head down, rudely ignoring everyone as he barreled out the door. It took him nearly a full minute to unlock the clinic, dropping his keys twice, his hands shaking. When he finally got inside, he locked the door behind him, staggered up the stairs, and dropped onto his old couch, shivering as though he was freezing.

He didn't want to believe it. Even now, a part of him fought against the idea, swearing up and down that Charlie wouldn't, Charlie would never. He knew Charlie, he *trusted* him. And Charlie knew *him,* knew what Philip had put him through, knew how deep those scars ran. But the other part—bellowing loud enough to drown out everything else, like a wounded animal—pointed out that maybe he didn't really know Charlie at all. Seven months was hardly a lifetime; it was barely a blip, really, in the scheme of things. Charlie had told him he'd never had a long-term relationship, and maybe this wasn't one either. Harvey knew he'd been horribly transparent with his feelings right from the beginning. It couldn't even have been a challenge for someone like Charlie, coaxing the lonely, smitten town geek into bed. And Harvey knew, as he'd always known, that there was something fundamentally flawed about him—something that made it impossible for anyone to want him for long. He knew, deep down, that he wasn't the man of anyone's dreams.

But why did he ask me to move in with him?

That was the sticky point, but when he thought about it, Charlie *hadn't* asked him to move in, had he? He'd presented Harvey with a key, but he'd also said *I know it doesn't make sense to ask you to move in with me, just consider this an invitation.* And dumb, desperate Harvey had gone ahead and moved himself in anyway, and Charlie had been too—what? kind? polite? embarrassed?—to say anything about it.

But the Flower Dance. And Zuzu City. And…

There were a lot of things that didn't make sense. But Harvey had never been good at understanding people's motivations. Years and years later, he still didn't understand why Philip hadn't just broken it off with him, and he doubted he ever would. And now, all the signs might point toward Charlie loving him—it might feel more real than anything ever had in his life—but he'd given Shane *flowers.* In Pelican Town, that only meant one thing, and Charlie knew what it meant; he'd done it for Harvey first, after all. Jodi might be a terrible gossip, but she wasn't a liar.

Harvey's thoughts swirled in such a chaotic mess, he felt sick. Everything felt like a tangle of contradictions: Charlie loved him, but Charlie had asked out Shane. Charlie treated him with the utmost sweetness and care, but Charlie had gone behind his back. None of it made any *sense.* For a long moment of weakness, Harvey considered simply going home and pretending he'd never heard any of it. Life could go on the way it had for the months since he'd moved in with Charlie; he'd still get to see him, hold him, be in his life. Maybe Jodi had been mistaken. Maybe the thing with Shane was temporary, or if it wasn't, maybe Harvey could at least get a little more of his time.

He'd done it before, after all.

But then he really thought back to the years with Philip. The months (hell, years) of sitting at home alone, wondering if Philip would be coming back that night, if he'd be coming back at all. The feeble excuses, the gaslighting. His own self-respect eroding bit by bit, his heart withering away on someone who didn't care about it. He didn't want Philip anymore—couldn't have wanted him less—but he couldn't honestly say he was over it all, even now.

No. If Charlie was cheating, he owed it to himself to confront him. If he wasn't cheating, if there had been some kind of misunderstanding...well, that still didn't erase Harvey's weeks of doubt. Maybe it was time to bring his fears to light. To finally voice them, and let Charlie make his decisions, once and for all.

He knew it was the right decision. He wished it felt like it.

* * * * *

The familiar bell above the door of the clinic jingled merrily as Charlie pushed his way in, his fingers wrapped around the neck of a wine bottle. He'd found a note on the door of the farmhouse earlier informing him that Harvey needed to update some paperwork after clinic hours ended, and asking Charlie to join him for dinner in his old apartment. Maru seemed to have already gone home, and the waiting room was deserted, so he made his way through the double doors and up the stairs. The smells and sounds of something delicious sizzling away on the stove reached him before he even stepped onto the landing.

"Hi, darlin'," he called, reflexively checking his boots before stepping through Harvey's door. Peering into the kitchen, he took a moment to lean on the doorframe and appreciate the view. Harvey was busy cooking fish in a skillet, his jacket and tie off and his shirtsleeves rolled up. He had an apron tied around his waist, which struck Charlie as one of the more adorable things he'd ever seen. It seemed Harvey hadn't heard him; unable to resist any

longer, he stepped up behind him and slid his arms around his waist, dropping his chin onto Harvey's shoulder. He was surprised when Harvey's body stiffened against him.

"I'm sorry, did I startle you?" Charlie asked, loosening his grip a little. Harvey shook his head, staying focused on the fish.

"I was just absorbed in cooking. This is just about ready, if you want to grab some plates."

Charlie felt oddly disappointed at the cool reception, but then Harvey wasn't the world's most natural cook; maybe he really was just concentrating hard on the food. He set the small table quickly, locating plates and silverware and wine glasses. As Harvey brought the sizzling skillet to the table, he frowned down at the glasses.

"I'm afraid I don't have any wine," he said, and Charlie grinned, producing the bottle with a flourish.

"The inaugural batch of my own personal brand," he said, barely containing his excitement. "I thought you might like to help me test it?" Harvey's eyes widened, and setting down the skillet, he reached out to run his fingers over the hand-written paper label. Charlie had hoped for a little more jubilation—he knew blackberry wine was Harvey's vice of choice—but at least he looked interested.

"You're making wine now?" Harvey asked, dishing out the fish and taking his seat.

"I am. I wanted to surprise you," Charlie said, feeling strangely as though he needed to explain. Why did Harvey sound vaguely upset?

"I see," he said distantly, but when Charlie hovered the bottle over his glass in offering, he nodded. Picking up the glass, he raised it and met Charlie's eyes for the first time since he'd arrived.

"To all your new adventures," he toasted, and though Charlie clinked his glass obediently, the words felt hollow and wrong. The smile on Harvey's face looked more sad than anything, but if there was something on his mind, he seemed unwilling to share it.

Dinner was a far cry from the celebratory meal he'd envisioned, and his efforts to engage Harvey in conversation were mostly met with one-word answers. The fish was delicious, and —to Charlie's intense relief—the wine wasn't bad either, but Harvey only picked at it and pushed his food around. Whenever Charlie wasn't looking, he could feel Harvey's eyes on him, but when he looked up Harvey was invariably looking away. He was relieved when he swallowed his last bite of fish, and could push his plate away and lean forward on the table. Harvey kept his eyes on his food.

"All right, V," he said, in as firm of a voice as he could muster; Harvey looked up at last, seeming a bit startled. "That was delicious, but you barely touched yours, and you've been quiet all night. Something's on your mind. What is it?" Harvey's eyes dropped again, and Charlie reached across the table, laying his hand where Harvey could reach it if he wanted to. "Please tell me, sweetheart."

Harvey flinched as though Charlie had called him a terrible slur, and took his glasses off to clean them, a classic sign he was flustered. “I, um. I was talking to Jodi today at Pierre’s, and she said...well.” He replaced his glasses, squared his shoulders, and looked Charlie in the eye at last. “She said she saw you giving Shane a gift in the Stardrop earlier.” This seemed to be the extent of what he’d wanted to say, and he waited, expectantly. Charlie’s mind whirled. Was Harvey accusing him of flirting with *Shane?* The idea was so absurd, he nearly laughed; he caught himself just in time.

“Well, it was hardly a secret,” he pointed out. “I did hand it to him right in the middle of the saloon.” This was evidently the wrong thing to say, and Harvey straightened, drawing himself to his full seated height.

“But you *did* give him a gift,” he pressed.

Charlie felt his own brow furrow in confusion. “Is that a problem?”

“It’s—you—” Harvey’s voice had grown tight, as though he might cry. Alarm bells went off in Charlie’s head, and he racked his brain frantically for what he could have done so wrong. “You gave him *flowers,* Charlie,” he managed at last, the words trembling. “Were you even going to tell me? Am I just supposed to be fine with that?”

“Fine with—I’m so confused,” Charlie said, but then it hit him. *Look, farm boy, in this town you gotta give someone flowers when you ask them out.* Oh. *Oh.* No wonder Harvey was upset. Even as he cursed his own stupidity, he felt relieved; it was all a big misunderstanding, he could fix this. “Oh, wait, darlin’, you’ve got it all wrong. It wasn’t a *bouquet,* it was just a handful of daffodils for Jas.”

“For Jas,” Harvey repeated flatly.

“She really likes them, and I keep finding them out in the woods. That’s all, I promise.”

Harvey was quiet for a long moment, during which Charlie’s earlier relief ebbed away. “Okay,” he said at last, barely audible, eyes downcast. Charlie hated seeing that look on his face, but surely Harvey understood, he couldn’t possibly believe...

“Were you really worried about Shane?”

Harvey made a noncommittal noise. “You two have gotten very close,” he said quietly. “That night, the—the bad night, when he came into the clinic, it was late, and it was you who carried him in—”

“I told you, I was out fishing in the forest and I found him on the cliff.”

“And the other day when I came home, he was in the chicken coop with you.”

“He was helping me settle in the blue chick I bought from him. He raised her, he wanted to make sure she would be okay.”

“And now,” Harvey went on as though Charlie hadn’t spoken, “you’re bringing him flowers —”

“Okay, hold on—”

“And you said he *hugged* you at Winter Star, which I’ve never seen him do with anyone. Is there anything you want to tell me?”

“No!” Charlie burst out, leaning even further forward, wishing the table weren’t in the way. “Harvey, Shane is a *friend.* My best friend, besides you, but only a friend. And I'm pretty sure he’s straight! Anyway, I would never cheat on you; you know that, don’t you?” The way Harvey evaded his gaze told him all he needed to know on that front. He felt his stomach lurch with real unease. He’d known Harvey was the jealous type—after five years with the serial adulterer, he had reason to be—but he hadn’t anticipated this.

“The other day,” Harvey said in a small voice, still not meeting his eyes, “you didn’t—you spent the day with him, and that night, you said—you were too tired. For, you know.”

“I helped him on the ranch all day because Marnie was sick.” Charlie’s prickling fear was mixed with exasperation now, and both were growing. “You *know* she was sick. You’re her doctor.”

“I do know, but—”

“Am I never allowed to say no? You’ve been too tired before.”

“I know.”

Harvey still hadn’t looked at him, and Charlie suddenly felt a hot surge of anger. “You told me yourself it was important for Shane to have emotional support during his recovery. I don’t understand where this is coming from.”

“I did say that,” Harvey agreed quietly. He fiddled with his silverware, aligning his fork perfectly beside his plate. Charlie couldn’t take it anymore.

“Are you accusing me of something?”

“Of course not,” Harvey said quickly—too quickly. Charlie felt himself trembling with adrenaline. He fought to maintain his calm.

“Harvey, look at me,” he said. Harvey lifted his head unwillingly, finally meeting Charlie’s eyes, and what Charlie saw there felt like a punch to the gut.

“You don’t believe me,” he whispered, dropping his hands heavily in his lap. Harvey shook his head, glancing down again.

“I don’t think you’ve done anything. I *don’t.* I just…”

“You just what?”

At last, Harvey sighed, resting his forearms on the table. He met Charlie’s gaze and took a deep breath. Charlie felt all the air leave the room.

“Charlie,” he began, in a gentle and wavering voice, “it’s all right if you’ve changed your mind. You don’t owe me anything; we haven’t made any promises to each other.” At Charlie’s splutter of shock, he held up a hand for silence. “You’re so much younger than me, and most of the single people around here are closer to your own age. I understand if you regret...entering into this arrangement.”

“Arrangement?” Charlie repeated, stunned. He felt a sense of unreality descend, like he was watching the scene on TV. “It’s not...this is not an *arrangement!”*

Harvey smiled tightly, his eyes glistening. “Whatever it is, you’re under no obligation to continue. I just...I want you to be sure.” Jesus, had Harvey already given up on him? He couldn’t bear it, anger and indignation and fear blending together into a horrible wave of nausea.

“Harvey, I love *you,”* he insisted, leaning forward; a line of pain appeared between Harvey’s eyebrows. “I *am* sure. Why are you doing this?”

“I just want what’s best for you—”

All at once, Charlie’s anger gained the upper hand over his other emotions. “Oh, what’s best for *me,* right? It’s got nothing to do with you, you’re not pushing me away because you’re scared. Jesus, Harvey, stop trying to put this on me. I haven’t done *anything* except be a good friend, and if that’s wrong I don’t know what to tell you.”

Harvey stood, looking hurt, which only served to make Charlie angrier. It wasn't *his* fault they were in this situation. “Okay, so I’m scared! You know what happened, you know why I —why—”

“I do know. I knew Philip did a number on you, I just didn’t know you’d dump me in self-defense the moment I spent any time with someone else.” Harvey jerked back as though he’d been burned, face crumpling, and Charlie instantly regretted bringing Philip into this. He scrubbed a hand over his face, emotionally exhausted. “Look, I’m sorry I said that. I just—”

“Is that what you think I’m doing? Dumping you?”

“It feels like it!”

“I just wanted to give you a chance, let you think about whether this is what you really want, if *I’m* —”

“You think I haven't thought about it? We *live* together, Harvey!”

“I know, but—this is your first long-term relationship, and—”

“There it is.” Charlie swallowed hard, suddenly feeling very young and very foolish. “I always wondered if that bothered you. You, what, you think I'm going to get bored of you? Because I'm young?”

“No,” Harvey hedged, glancing away, "that's not—you can just be a little impulsive, sometimes, and I'm so—I would understand, if—”

“Okay, Harvey,” Charlie interrupted, the last of his anger burning out into a full-body exhaustion. “You want me to think about it, I’ll think about it.” He stood up, tossing his napkin down into his chair, and started for the door; Harvey looked as though he was about to step in front of him, then seemed to think better of it. He wrung his hands, looking distraught.

“Charlie, I—”

“Enjoy the wine,” Charlie snapped, and slammed the door behind him.

Chapter End Notes

I'm so sorry! We can't have totally smooth sailing for too long; what fun is that? :) Poor Harvey. Turns out even snagging a dreamy farm boyfriend can't magically make all his anxiety disappear.

Tomorrow: Harvey wallows. Charlie considers. Harvey comes to a decision, but Charlie beats him to the punch.

Chapter 19: Spring, Year 2

Chapter Summary

> Maru is a good friend. Charlie considers his options. Harvey makes a decision, but Charlie beats him to it.

Chapter Notes

> I'm sorry for what I put you through yesterday! I promise to make up for it. No content warnings this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

On the fifth day since Charlie had stormed out of his apartment, Harvey took a nearly unprecedented day off. He lay on his couch in his pajamas, his head dangling off the end, the same old record spinning over and over again. (He'd boxed up all of his good ones, along with his good turntable, when he'd moved into Charlie's house. But beggars couldn't be choosers.) The blood rushing to his head was beginning to give him a headache, but he couldn't seem to find the energy to move. He was still in this stupor, glasses hanging precariously from his nose, when Maru came barging in without knocking. She stomped over to the record player with a furious look on her face.

"I'm confiscating this," she announced, and whipped the vinyl off the turntable without even bothering to pull the needle away. This elicited a horrible screech from the record and a bark of protest from Harvey, both of which she ignored. She whirled on him, drawing herself up to all five-foot-two of her full height. Somehow, she looked much taller.

"If I hear one more note of Skeeter Davis out of this apartment," she seethed, brandishing the record like a weapon, "I swear to Yoba I'll throw your entire collection out the window. It's your call if you want to lay around here listening to tragic 60s pop songs, but some people have to *work downstairs."*

"I'll turn it down," Harvey grumbled.

"You won't. You'll turn it *off*. Enough, Harvey." She propped her free hand on her hip, squinting down at him through her glasses with obvious irritation. "I can't believe you called in sick for this."

"I didn't call in anything, I own the clinic," he retorted, sitting up; oh Yoba, the blood rushing back to his feet felt horrible. "And there weren't any patients today. I did say for you to come

get me if there was a real emergency."

"You are a real emergency," she snapped. "What are you moping for, anyway? I know Charlie's been busy, but that's happened before, there's no reason to—"

"He's not busy," Harvey interrupted dully. Maru cocked her head at him.

"What are you talking about?"

Harvey squeezed his eyes shut; he wasn't sure how to explain it, and saying the words out loud made it feel real in a way he wasn't ready to face yet, but Maru clearly wasn't going anywhere. "He...I...I did something stupid, and I think...it's over."

"Oh, no," she breathed, and came to sit on the couch beside him. Her entire posture had changed, shifting from annoyance to sympathy in the space of one sentence. "What happened?"

"I—he was spending all this time with Shane, and I was jealous—" Catching sight of Maru's expression, he hastily added, "I know Shane's in recovery, I know he needs support and it doesn't mean anything, I just—I got scared, and I tried to talk to him, but it sounded like I was accusing him, and—he said he was going to go think it over, and—it's been five days, Maru, I think he's done." To his intense mortification, a tear spilled over, and Maru's head tilted in pity.

"Oh, doc. I'm sure it's not over. He probably just needs time to cool off."

Harvey shook his head, a few more tears joining the first, and wiped viciously at his face. "You didn't see him when he left. I've never seen him that angry. I—" His voice caught, and he fought through it, hating himself more with every moment. "I can't believe I did this, Maru, I ruined everything. He was the best thing that ever happened to me, and I lost him." The dam burst, and he began crying in earnest, covering his face with his hands. He felt Maru's arm go around his shaking shoulders, and somehow or another he wound up lying down, weeping into her knees. Her hand stroked through his hair, a gesture that felt both alien and distantly familiar, and through the haze of pain he wondered vaguely if this was what it was like to have a parent. In the next instant, he felt more embarrassed than ever; he was thirteen years older than Maru, her *employer,* crying all over her like a child.

"You know," Maru said from far above him, "you're so smart, Harvey, and you're older than me, so sometimes I forget you're still a dumb boy." He let out a startled little hiccup of laughter, and she patted his head. "Fights like this happen, okay? You're right, you did something stupid, but Charlie will forgive you. I know he will."

"How do you know that?"

"Because he loves you," she said gently, and Harvey squeezed his eyes shut against a fresh wave of tears. "He told me once he was crazy about you. He's not going to give you up that easily." Her hand resumed its stroking, and he focused on trying to calm himself. At last, she added, "Why don't you just go apologize?"

“I can’t,” he said thickly. “He said he was going to think about it. It’s his decision.”

Maru sighed, obviously disagreeing, but knowing better than to argue. “Well, in that case,” she said, gently extracting her legs from beneath him, “I’m going to go lock up early and run to the Stardrop. I’ll be right back.”

“Why?”

“If we’re going to keep talking about feelings, we need wine.”

* * * * *

Lying in bed alone, listening to the thunder and holding a half-finished model airplane up to the moonlight, Charlie did what he’d promised: he thought about it.

* * * * *

One week. An entire week had passed since he’d sent Charlie away, and in that time, Harvey hadn’t once set eyes on the farmer; it really seemed as though Charlie had taken him seriously. Maybe he had taken Harvey’s offer to end their relationship.

Maybe he had taken it to Shane’s bed.

The thought made his stomach roll sickeningly. Harvey knew it wasn’t fair; he knew Charlie meant what he said, wouldn’t betray him like that, in all likelihood really *did* feel nothing but friendship for Shane. But Harvey’s treacherous, hateful brain kept supplying him with images anyway: the two of them standing close together in a dark corner at the Stardrop, their shoulders brushing as they leaned in to talk; Shane’s eyes roving over Charlie’s muscular body, his sweaty shirt clinging to his back as he worked the fields; worst of all, despite his attempts to block it out, the two of them entwined in the farmhouse bed, Charlie calling out Shane’s name in pleasure. Harvey gritted his teeth, thumping his head down on his desk, and wished for the thousandth time he hadn’t been such an idiot. Why couldn’t he fight for what he wanted? Why did he push away first, refusing to even try to hold on? If Charlie did leave him, he would have only himself to blame.

He imagined life in Stardew Valley after that. Even if it wasn't Shane, it would be *somebody,* someday. He could picture it: watching the pair of them strolling around town hand in hand, Shane-or-someone moving into the farmhouse, perhaps even getting married in the town square. He imagined the years of pining, wishing he’d had the guts to keep what he really wanted. Watching as someone else lived the life he’d just started, tentatively, to imagine for his own. Meanwhile, where would Harvey be? Still living in the little apartment above the clinic, alone again, shuffling patients in and out and wishing he’d been brave.

He couldn’t stand it. He’d have to move again.

Unless...Harvey picked his head up, squinting at the photo he kept tacked next to his computer. It was the one Lewis had taken at the Fair, just after Charlie had won the grange display competition. Mayor Lewis had lifted his camera to take Charlie’s photo, and at the last moment Charlie had pulled Harvey into the frame, pressing a smacking kiss to his cheek.

Harvey looked beet-red but undeniably happy. It was one of the only photos of himself he'd ever liked. And Charlie looked so beautiful: incandescent with happiness from his win, his whole body leaning into Harvey's, arms wrapped tight around him. He looked...well...

He looked like a man in love.

Harvey felt the nausea in his stomach give way to something else: something stronger, something brighter. Maybe Maru was right, and it wasn't too late. Maybe he really *could* go to Charlie, apologize for doubting him, and tell him how he felt; maybe it could all go back to the way it had been before. Or maybe it couldn't, but at least Harvey wouldn't have to live with years of knowing he'd thrown it all away without a fight. He checked his schedule hurriedly, already pulling on his jacket; no more patients today, just paperwork. Perfect.

Maru's head snapped up as he came barreling through the waiting room, her mouth opening to ask a question. "I'm running out for a bit," he called over his shoulder as he passed. "If I'm not back by the time you leave just lock up, I'll— *oof!"*

As he pushed through the front door, he ran into something solid, something that caught him by the arms to keep him from falling over. He righted himself, straightening his glasses back up, and saw that the something was Charlie. As it always had, his heart leapt into overdrive, hammering against his ribs.

"Hello," he stammered at last, and Charlie gave him a small smile.

"Hi," he said, stepping back and releasing Harvey's arms. "Going somewhere?"

"No," Harvey blurted idiotically, cursing himself. Of *course* he'd been going somewhere, he'd nearly mowed Charlie down in his haste. "I mean, nothing that can't wait."

If Charlie found this odd, he didn't remark on it. "Good," he said. "Want to take a walk with me?"

"Okay," Harvey agreed, trying to sort out his thoughts. His blazing purpose of a few moments prior had died down a bit, overtaken by his relief at seeing Charlie again, and he wasn't sure what to think of this request. He fell into step beside Charlie, who began leading them north of town, away from the square.

"How have you been?" he asked, and Harvey's stomach plummeted once again. He and Charlie never did small talk anymore. Whatever this politely distant line of conversation meant, it couldn't be good.

"Okay," he said again, while his mind shrieked *awful, I've been awful, I missed you so much I couldn't breathe, please don't leave me.* Charlie nodded absently, and they walked on in not-entirely-comfortable silence. When they reached the fountain, Charlie stopped—mercifully, no one else was out enjoying the day—and turned to stare into the water.

"I've been thinking about what you said," he began, and Harvey felt faint. Oh Yoba, it was too late, wasn't it? Harvey had made him *think about it* and he'd already reached his conclusion. He longed to sit down, to ease the sudden dizziness, but he wanted Charlie to get

this out and over with as soon as possible. “Haven’t been able to think about anything else, actually. But there’s something I need to know.”

“Okay,” Harvey said, and cursed himself. Could he say anything else today? He wasn't doing a great job of convincing Charlie to stay, him and his *okays.*

Charlie turned back to look at him, and Harvey saw the apprehension in his eyes. “Did you *really* think I was cheating on you?”

Oh, Yoba, the shame. Harvey’s stomach felt as though it was trying to twist itself into a knot. “No,” he said, pouring as much sincerity into it as he could. Feeling it wasn't enough, he barreled on: “I’m so sorry, Charlie, that was awful of me. I know you weren’t, I never should have brought it up, I know Shane is your friend and I trust you. I just got scared, and I—I’m sorry.”

To his intense relief, Charlie gave him a small smile. “That’s good,” he said gently. “For the record, I’m sorry, too. I shouldn’t have stormed out, and I shouldn’t have brought up your past. You trusted me with that information, and I used it against you.

“I know you get worried. I can’t fix that for you; I wish I could. All I can do is ask that if you’re getting scared, *tell* me. We can always talk through it.” He swallowed, and Harvey realized that Charlie was just as nervous as he was. “Even if it’s just as your friend.”

Just as your friend. There it was: the beginning of the end. Harvey felt cold all over and closed his eyes, swaying a little. “Okay,” he managed, aiming for “nonchalant” and landing on “strangled.”

“And you were right. I *can* be impulsive. I know I moved here on a whim, and we moved in together kind of fast. I guess I'm just not really one to wait around long when something feels right.”

Or when it feels wrong, Harvey filled in mentally. Charlie was too nice. He was going to make this all about him, not about Harvey and his insecurity, *it's not you, it's me—*

“You asked me to think about what I wanted,” he continued, as though he weren’t pulling Harvey to pieces. “And I did. I thought about whether I wanted, what did you call it? ‘A new adventure.’”

Harvey could *hear* it, could hear the stupid toast he’d made before throwing his own life under the bus. He swallowed hard, the corners of his eyes pricking, and thought fervently that he’d give anything—a kidney, his medical license, ten years of his life—to go back to that moment and not screw it up. To make a genuine toast, and drink Charlie’s very good wine, and tell him he was proud of him. But time didn’t work that way, and it was too late. He stood rooted to the spot, eyes screwed shut, and wondered how quickly he could get a position in another town, another province, hell, another *country.* Could the traveling merchant smuggle him into the Gotoro Republic? He distantly heard Charlie shifting in the grass and wondered if he was leaving already, but when his voice came again, it was closer than he’d expected.

“Harvey? Can you look at me?” *No, I can’t, anything but that,* he thought, but with a massive effort he wrenched open his stinging eyes. And saw...nothing. Where was Charlie? His eyes darted around, and when he saw him, his breath caught.

Charlie was on the ground before him, down on one knee.

It doesn’t mean—it can’t—

“Harvey,” he whispered, so softly Harvey had to lean in a little to hear him. Harvey’s heart was in his throat again, pounding so hard it must have been audible, but he couldn’t summon a single word, a single coherent thought. Charlie’s smile was back on his face, nervous but dazzling, and just the sight of it nearly brought Harvey to his knees.

“Harvey, I want *you,”* he went on, still in that hushed voice. “Always. I want you when you’re happy, and I want you when you’re not. I want to be the one who makes you feel good again. I want to dance with you and read with you and hold you when you’re having a rough day. I want every part of you, even the ones you wish you could change, because they’re *you.”* He broke off and swallowed, visibly emotional, but still smiling. “All my life, I've been looking for something. I never knew what it was, but I came to Stardew Valley trying to find it, and I finally know why. It was you.” His hand moved to his pocket, and Harvey’s brain abruptly came back online, flooding him with details: the sound of the fountain splashing, the scent of lilacs on the air, the way Charlie’s hair blew gently across his face as he searched in his pocket. Time seemed to slow to a crawl, and Harvey felt hope creeping up inside him again.

After what felt like an eternity, Charlie removed a small, rough-hewn wooden box from his pocket. He held it out in one hand, and Harvey saw that it had an H carved into the top; then Charlie’s hand was covering it, pulling off the lid, and now Harvey really *was* going to faint, there was somehow no air despite the gentle spring breeze.

Inside the box, its long chain coiled inside a hollow in the wood, was a mermaid’s pendant.

“I love you, Harvey,” Charlie said, and Harvey tore his eyes from the small blue shell to see Charlie’s face, his smile tremulous and filled with hope. “Will you marry me?”

A million protests rose to Harvey’s lips. He was too old, too sad, too boring; Charlie deserved someone young and vibrant. He was too laden with baggage, would never be able to keep his jealousy and anxiety in check, was too bitter about his unrealized dreams. Surely Charlie didn’t *really* want to listen to jazz and build model airplanes on Friday nights. And anyway, he’d hurt Charlie, and he didn’t deserve his forgiveness so easily. All the usual rationalizations and defenses came to mind, and his every instinct told him to voice them.

But that tiny, blazing coal of determination had flared back into being, burning in his belly, giving him courage. *You want him,* it seemed to whisper, *and he wants you.* Did any of that other stuff really matter? Charlie had seen him at his most insecure, his jealous worst, and decided to get on one knee and offer up his heart anyway. Harvey had never before considered the possibility, but maybe it was okay that he got scared. Maybe Charlie loved Harvey just as fiercely as Harvey loved him, and they could get through it together. After all

this time, Harvey was having an epiphany: he didn't have to be loved *in spite of* who he was. He could be loved *for* who he was.

For once in his life, Harvey let himself reach out and take what he really wanted.

"Yes," he breathed, and Charlie's whole face changed, lighting up as though he hardly dared hope he'd heard correctly.

"Yes?" he repeated, his voice shaking.

Harvey laughed, suddenly weightless in a way he hadn't felt for years. "Yes!" he all but shouted, and Charlie was on his feet and had his arms around him, was kissing him as though he were the only available source of oxygen. Harvey felt delirious, as though he might wake up at any moment to find himself alone in bed again, but he ruthlessly pushed it down. From now on, he thought, he would shut out his doubts, would believe in Charlie and in their love. From now on, Harvey would do his very best to be happy.

Charlie pulled back, and Harvey tried to follow him, desperate for his touch after their days apart. But as Charlie's hands reached around his neck and he felt the tiny weight of the silver chain resting cool against his skin, he understood. The clasp fastened, Charlie let go and took his hands instead. His eyes brimmed with tears above his face-cracking grin. Harvey couldn't resist looking down at himself; seeing the pointed blue shell resting on his chest, he felt as though he would explode from joy.

"I thought," he said, and found his voice was trembling too, "that you were breaking up with me. You were gone so long, I thought...you'd taken me up on my offer."

"I was waiting for it to rain," Charlie said, and Harvey's mouth dropped open, understanding washing over him all at once. "You know that old guy with the pendants only shows up when it's raining?" He squinted up at the sky. "This is a weird place, V."

Harvey laughed again, and Charlie was laughing too, and all of a sudden he felt himself *literally* swept off his feet—Charlie had caught him around the waist and was swinging him through the air as though he weighed nothing, as though he weren't the taller one by a head. He tilted his head back, feeling like he could fly, like he wouldn't need a hot air balloon to float off the ground completely. At last, Charlie put him down, letting him slide down that muscular body until his feet touched earth. Harvey buried his fingers in Charlie's windswept hair, tilting his head back, kissing him again. He never had to stop, he realized. He could have this for the rest of his life. The burning prickle was back behind his eyelids, but it felt totally different now, the lump in his throat seemingly just a mass of joy he couldn't express.

"Thank you," he whispered against Charlie's lips, "for not listening to me."

Charlie's hand stroked up and down his spine, smoothing his jacket. "It's not your fault," he murmured, eyes fixed on Harvey's mouth in a way that made him shiver all over. "People have treated you badly, and you've been hurt. That leaves its marks. But, V…" He raised his eyes to Harvey's, and they burned with a certainty that warmed the pit of Harvey's stomach. "That's never going to happen again, darlin'. I'd die before I'd hurt you. I swear." He leaned

their foreheads together, his eyes drifting closed. “I’m gonna spend the rest of my life making you believe it.”

“I do believe it,” Harvey said, and for the first time, it felt like the truth.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaand there we go! Didn't I promise we would get through the angst quickly? It isn't 100% over, a marriage proposal doesn't magically fix everything, but it's a start.

Since we're at chapter 19, this actually marks the halfway point of the fic! (Chapters-wise, at least. Word count-wise, I think we still have more than 50% to go.) I knew, when I started writing this, that I didn't want it to end with their wedding. I wanted to see what their lives would be like together afterward, and how their relationship would change them as people. I hope you're up for another 150k words or so!

Tomorrow: a date is set, an apology casserole is made, and two more important questions are asked. Charlie and Harvey deliver the happy news to Charlie's mother, but things don't go quite as intended.

Chapter 20: Spring, Year 2

Chapter Summary

> A date is set, an apology casserole is made, and two important questions are asked. Charlie and Harvey deliver the happy news to Charlie's mother, but things don't go quite as intended.

Chapter Notes

> Yesterday's chapter was pretty short, wasn't it? Let's make up for that today. No content warnings for this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Charlie’s heart woke up before his brain. As the sunlight grew behind his closed eyelids, he wondered why he felt so radiantly happy; he was almost giddy with it, and he wasn’t even fully awake yet. He shifted, stretching a little, and his hands brushed across the warm plane of Harvey’s chest. Then his fingers made contact with something small and smooth, just above Harvey’s heart, and he remembered. His eyes flew open to see Harvey, already awake and watching him, beaming from ear to ear. He hadn’t retrieved his clothes from where they’d flung them last night, but the mermaid’s pendant still rested on his chest. It was an extremely good look, in Charlie’s opinion.

“Good morning,” Charlie whispered, an answering grin spreading helplessly across his own face. Harvey reached out, stroking Charlie’s hair out of his eyes.

“Yoba, I missed waking up with you,” he whispered, and leaned forward to kiss Charlie. They tangled their limbs together, clinging tight, breathing in the scent of each other. Charlie had missed him just as much; he’d cursed the Old Mariner on more than one occasion for only coming out in the rain, picky old bastard. (At least the old man had believed he was really in love; he’d been prepared to beat him with a hunk of driftwood otherwise.) He supposed it must’ve been worse for Harvey, sitting in his old apartment and wondering if Charlie was ever coming back. In truth, there never had been any real question for Charlie, once he'd gotten over his bruised feelings. He'd known right away that he still wanted to be with Harvey; after another four hours, he'd realized he wanted to be with him forever. Compared to that knowledge, everything else—their fight, Charlie's pride, whether or not it was *too soon* by most people's standards—seemed far less important.

“Me too. Let’s just stay in bed forever.”

“I think I did suggest that once.”

They kissed lazily, rolling over so Harvey pinned Charlie to the mattress. He would happily have stayed there all day, but Pizza crowed in the distance, signaling time for both of them to get up. Charlie had animals and crops to attend to; Harvey had patients. Reluctantly, he pulled back, laughing as Harvey tried to follow him.

“As nice as this is,” he murmured against Harvey’s jaw, “we have to go to work.”

“No, we don’t.”

“You have patients.”

“No, I don’t.”

“Yes, you do. Do you want Maru to have to come over here and find us?”

Harvey looked down between them, then back up at Charlie from under his lashes. “She’ll probably only do it once,” he pointed out, and Charlie burst into laughter. He aimed a well-placed smack at Harvey’s hip, and the doctor rolled off at last, grumbling.

It took them nearly an hour to leave the house, by which time Pizza’s crows had taken on a tone of flat-out rage. Charlie couldn’t help it; every time he and Harvey crossed paths in their morning routine, they ended up tangled against the nearest vertical surface, making out like teenagers. His relief at having Harvey back home, and his joy at knowing they’d be together forever, were proving to be too potent for him to ignore. When they’d finally gotten themselves showered, dressed, caffeinated, and detached, Harvey started out the door.

“Oh, wait, you forgot your tie!” Charlie called, already turning to grab it from the bedroom. He paused, though, as Harvey blushed deeply enough for him to see it across the room.

“Oh, um—I was thinking, maybe, I wouldn’t wear one today,” Harvey stammered, and Charlie finally noticed: the top button of his shirt was undone, leaving the mermaid’s pendant visible underneath. *Holy shit,* Charlie thought, *too cute, too cute, I’m gonna die.*

“Good call,” was all he said, smirking and trying to pretend his heart wasn’t melting into his shoes. Harvey ducked his head, grinning, and left before Charlie could drag him back into bed again. A shame, he thought, but probably for the best. *One* of them had to be a responsible adult. He pulled on his boots and headed for the chicken coop, hoping Harvey would still want to marry him after Pizza mauled him half to death.

“So now I guess we need to set a date,” Charlie mused, as they sat beside the fountain eating lunch. He’d brought a little picnic to share with Harvey, who had closed the clinic for a little while. Charlie knew the fountain was going to hold a special place in his heart from then on; every time he walked past it, he thought of the breathtaking smile on Harvey’s face when he’d said *yes*. “Any thoughts?”

Harvey shrugged, swallowing a bite of sandwich. “I think other than avoiding festival days, it can pretty much be anytime,” he said. “Most people get married in about two weeks around here, I think?”

Charlie choked on the mouthful of water he’d just taken, spraying it everywhere. Harvey patted him on the back as he composed himself. “Two *weeks?* How—I—people in Zuzu take like a *year!”*

“Well, yes, but it isn’t like there’s much to plan around here,” Harvey pointed out. “The only place big enough to hold a wedding is the square, so there’s the venue. The only person who can officiate is Lewis, unless you bring someone in from outside. Gus makes the food, Haley can probably take the photos, Evelyn does the flowers. That’s kind of...it?”

“Oh,” Charlie said absently, processing this information.

“Unless...did you want to get married in the city?”

“No! *Definitely* not. I want to do it right here, with all our friends. I just...two weeks is faster than I was expecting, that’s all.”

Charlie could see the effect those words had on Harvey, even as his fiancé (his *fiancé!)* made a valiant effort to keep it from his face. “That’s okay,” he said, smiling and glancing down. “We can take all the time you need.”

“No, Harvey, wait.” He set his food aside and put his hands on Harvey’s knee, leaning close. Harvey met his gaze then, still looking a little uncertain. “I don’t need time to *think about it* or anything like that. I’d marry you today, darlin’.” At this, Harvey turned slightly pink, looking mollified. “I just, well...I kind of wanted to…” He took a deep breath. “I want to tell my mom in person,” he said finally, “not in a letter. And I wanted to invite her. If you’re okay with that.”

“If I’m okay with that?” Harvey repeated incredulously. “Charlie, honey, she’s your *mother.* You don’t need to ask.”

“Right. Um...so I’ve told you about her, how, uh…”

“How she wishes you’d dump me and shut down the farm and move back to Zuzu City,” Harvey filled in, the end of his mustache twitching. Oh, good, he was laughing about it. “Yes, you’ve mentioned it.”

“Yeah, pretty much that. So I know it’s a big ask, but would you...come with me? To tell her?” Charlie held his breath. He’d been trying to work out his own conflicted feelings for days, and he’d gotten nowhere. He loved his mom, but her insistence on undermining his relationship with Harvey—and, oh yeah, his *entire life* in Stardew Valley—was making it difficult to keep writing to her with the same enthusiasm. Still, he *thought* he wanted her at his wedding. Probably? She’d be happy for him, wouldn’t she?

... *Or* she’d do her best to drive the love of his life away and force him into an arranged marriage with Marjorie’s Hot Son, MBA. 50/50 shot.

“Char,” Harvey said gently, bringing him back to the present, “of course I will. I’d love to meet her.”

Charlie’s held breath left him in a rush. “Oh, thank god. I’m sorry in advance if she says anything terrible. Actually, scratch that, I’m sorry in advance for literally everything she says.”

Harvey burst out laughing, and in spite of his nerves, Charlie joined in. As they leaned against each other, the thought bounced around in his brain again— *fiancé, fiancé, my fiancé* —and suddenly, two weeks didn’t seem fast at all. It seemed kind of on the long side, actually. But if they were going to make an effort to invite his mother, they were going to have to give her at least a *little* time to arrange her trip to the Valley.

“Can we go this weekend?” Charlie asked, and Harvey looked surprised.

“I’ll double check my calendar, but I don’t think I have any patients scheduled, and I can ask Maru to watch the clinic,” he replied. “In a hurry to get it over with?”

Charlie shook his head, ducking in to kiss Harvey’s temple. “No,” he said, “but she’ll need to make plans if she’s coming to the wedding, and I’m gonna marry you in a month.” Harvey’s eyes widened, and Charlie beamed at him, suddenly very impatient. “If that works for you.”

Harvey gave him a look that made him understand why everyone had been so sure Charlie’s affections were reciprocated, back in the fall; his eyes practically sparkled. “I’ll double check my calendar,” he repeated softly, “but I’m pretty sure I can pencil you in.”

On Charlie’s way back to the farm, he ran into someone walking in the opposite direction— away from his house. As their face came into focus, he sighed inwardly; he hadn’t been looking forward to this eventual run-in.

“Hello, Jodi,” he called. Might as well get it over with.

“Hi, Charlie.” Jodi didn’t look great, to be honest. She wrung her hands as she approached him, her posture timid. They stopped a few feet apart in the middle of the road, and he waited for her to speak; when she didn’t, he prodded her along.

“Something on your mind?” he asked, with a politeness he didn’t feel.

“I—yes,” she said haltingly. “I spoke to Maru the other day, and she told me...what happened between you and Doctor Harvey.”

“Did she.”

“I just wanted to tell you how sorry I am,” Jodi said, all in a rush, as though she’d rehearsed this part. “I feel terrible that I caused trouble in your relationship.”

“I have to admit, Jodi, I don’t really understand why you wouldn’t talk to *me,* if you were so concerned about my behavior,” he said, trying to keep his voice gentle. Jodi looked at the

ground, and he felt like a bit of an asshole, but then he remembered Harvey pushing his food around his plate and looking lost, that night they'd fought. "Even if something *had* been going on, which it wasn't—"

"I know it wasn't—"

"—Harvey didn't need to hear that from someone else. It really upset him." He took a breath, reminding himself that everything was fine now. "He almost broke up with me."

"I'm so sorry," Jodi repeated, looking genuinely chastised. "Really. I can't apologize enough."

Charlie eyed her for a moment, considering, and then thought: to hell with it. He was tired of holding onto bad feelings about the situation. "It's okay," he said, a bit more kindly. "We made up."

"I'm so glad to hear that."

"We're getting married, actually," he added, and despite himself, he couldn't suppress a smile. Jodi's face lit up, her hands balling into little fists of excitement.

"Oh, Charlie! That's wonderful! I just know you two are going to be so happy. Anyone can see how much he loves you." She reached out a hand, resting it above Charlie's elbow. "I know I don't particularly deserve it, but I do hope my family will still be invited. Vincent and Sam love weddings."

"Of course you're invited," Charlie insisted. "Everyone in town is. We wouldn't have it any other way."

"This calls for a celebration." Jodi clapped her hands together once, decisively. "Would you and Harvey want to come for dinner at my house tonight? I'd like to cook for you two, to try and make it up to you a little."

"You don't have to make anything up to us," Charlie protested, but Jodi's smile faltered.

"Please," she said simply. "I'd really like to."

"Well then," he agreed, thinking that at least he wouldn't have to go fishing after all, "we'll see you there."

The dinner had been nice. Not the actual food—which had been some kind of terrifying casserole involving bass—but Jodi had been pleasant and enthusiastic about their wedding plans, and Sam and Vincent had begged Harvey for his weirdest medical stories. He'd told some from his Zuzu City days, not wanting either of Jodi's sons to connect them to anyone in Pelican Town. Some of them Charlie had already heard, but he hung on Harvey's words all the same, just happy to have him back at his side.

But now, walking back to the farm hand-in-hand, Charlie was lost in thought. Jodi had inquired about their wedding party, and Charlie had told her they hadn't discussed it yet. According to her, it was traditional in Pelican Town for the bride and groom (or groom and groom) to have one attendant each. One name had instantly popped into Charlie's head, the obvious answer to the question of who would be his best man, but he hated to bring it up with Harvey. It felt like poking at a wound that had only just closed. He wasn't sure what to do.

"You're awfully quiet," Harvey prodded gently, and Charlie snapped out of it, giving him what he hoped was a reassuring smile.

"Sorry. Thinking about the wedding."

"Anything in particular?"

"Um." Charlie took a deep breath, steadying himself. "Well...we have to pick a wedding party, right? We each need a best man or....best woman, or whatever."

Harvey blinked, one eyebrow raised quizzically. "Sure. I mean, I don't think we *have* to, but yes, that's tradition. Would you rather we didn't?"

"No," Charlie sighed, and there was nothing for it, he was just going to have to spit it out, "it's just...well, I was thinking about who I would pick, and, um. Well."

So much for spitting it out.

"I had just assumed it would be Shane," Harvey said simply, and Charlie's head whipped around, his jaw dropped. "I didn't realize it was such a difficult decision. Who are the other candidates? Maybe I can help."

"I—no, I wanted to ask Shane," Charlie said, feeling off-balance, "there's nobody else I'd ask really, but...are you okay with that? After…"

"Oh. Wait a moment, hang on." Harvey stopped walking, pulling Charlie around to face him. It was a perfect night; they stood just inside the southern border of the farm, on the narrow path Charlie had carved out of the wild grass and flowers there. In the light of the nearly-full moon, he could make out Harvey's expression as clear as day, looking peaceful and unclouded. "Listen to me, sweetheart. When I said I would marry you, I meant *you,* the way you are. Not 'you, if you give up your friends' or 'you, if you walk on eggshells around me for the rest of our lives.' Shane is your best friend, and you care about each other. I want you to be happy, and that means I want you to feel like you can spend time with all the people you love. *And* have your best friend at your side on our wedding day." He smiled at Charlie, looking a little nervous for the first time during this whole speech, and glanced at his feet. "Actually, I think...it's time Shane and I got to know each other better. Do you want to set up that dinner we talked about?"

Charlie stared at his fiancé with round eyes, trying desperately not to cry. He'd done enough of that lately, but this—Harvey had lifted the last remaining weight off his shoulders without a moment's hesitation, and Charlie hadn't realized how heavy it was until it was gone. He'd meant every word of his proposal, he wanted to marry Harvey no matter what, but he'd

wondered in the back of his mind how he was going to reconcile his husband (oh my god, *husband)* and his best friend. Apparently, it wasn't an issue.

"Charlie?" Harvey asked tentatively, concern creeping into his tone. "Are you— *oof!"* Charlie interrupted his question by flinging his arms around Harvey's middle at high velocity, burying his face in the doctor's shirt. He breathed in the calming scent of him, so overcome with happiness he couldn't form words.

"I love you," he managed thickly at last, feeling Harvey's own arms wrap around his shoulders. "Thank you."

Harvey didn't respond right away, just pressed a long kiss to the top of Charlie's head. "I'm not going to get it right all the time," he murmured into Charlie's hair. "But I'm going to try."

Charlie just squeezed him tighter, unable to put into words how much that meant to him. When he pulled back and they resumed walking, hand in hand again, a thought occurred to him. "Hey! You have to pick somebody too!"

"Ah, well, I was thinking I would ask Maru," Harvey said, scrubbing his free hand along the back of his neck. "Do you think she'd say yes?"

"I think she might send her robots after you if you didn't," Charlie said somberly, and Harvey huffed a laugh.

"Better not risk it, then. I'll ask her tomorrow."

Objectively, Charlie knew he was being ridiculous. He'd already asked the *really* nerve-wracking question; after a marriage proposal, what was a little favor between friends? Barely even a favor, anyway, just *put on a suit and come stand silently in my general vicinity for about twenty minutes while I get married, OK?*

Oh. And make a toast.

Fuck.

But as much as Charlie liked Shane, that didn't change the fact that he was surly, cynical, and very avoidant of anything to do with *feelings.* He had hidden depths, of course—Charlie the Chicken was a testament to that—but Shane much preferred those depths *stay* hidden. Charlie didn't really know how to go about asking this question, or what to expect for an answer. He stood outside Marnie's door, running his lines over and over in his head, second-guessing every word. Just when he'd nearly worked up the nerve to go inside, the door opened, and Shane stood blinking in the frame.

"You're being weird," he declared instantly, and Charlie puffed up with indignation. He *was* being weird, of course, but he'd thought he was hiding it okay.

"How do you know? You just opened the door!"

“Windows, dude,” Shane said, gesturing in the vague direction of his bedroom. “Been watching you stand out here for ten minutes.”

“See, *that’s* weird.”

“What’s wrong with you?” Shane pushed past Charlie, zipping his hoodie over his Joja uniform, and started walking in the direction of the square. He threw a single glance over his shoulder, an obvious *you coming?,* and Charlie hurried along in his wake.

“I have news,” Charlie began, and Shane looked him up and down before returning his gaze to the front.

“Finally asked him, huh,” he smirked, hands in his pockets. Charlie’s mouth fell open again.

“What do you mean, *finally?* We’ve only been dating for, like, seven months!”

Shane waved this away with an impatient hand. “You were *obviously* gonna get married. Honestly, he probably would have said yes on your first date. I thought you’d ask him at Winter Star, but I just figured you wussed out.” His eyes darted over to Charlie for a moment, and he said in a too-casual voice, “Big fight over, then?”

It had been a tricky balancing act, spending time with Shane during his week apart from Harvey. At first, Charlie had felt almost guilty for visiting Shane, but he’d quickly fought that down. Whatever happened with him and Harvey, he *hadn’t* done anything sketchy with Shane, and he wasn’t going to let it interfere with their friendship. He’d told Shane about their fight, but only in the vaguest of details; he didn’t want to give Shane the sense that he had anything to apologize for or feel uncomfortable about. Still, on some level, Charlie thought maybe he knew. For someone who claimed not to understand people, Shane was awfully intuitive.

“Over,” Charlie confirmed, and left it at that.

“Well, congrats,” Shane said. “Happy for you.” From Shane, that was a pretty flowery speech, really. Charlie grinned, feeling stupidly fond, and Shane stopped in his tracks with an aggravated sigh.

“You’re *doing* it again,” he complained, “being weird. Seriously, what is it? If you didn’t come here to tell me your big news, what do you want?”

“Can’t a guy just want to spend time in his friend’s warm, loving presence?” Charlie asked, batting his eyelashes, and Shane made a heaving sound before setting off across the square again.

“No.”

“Okay, hang on, I’ll tell you—”

“Too late, don’t give a shit,” Shane threw back over his shoulder, and Charlie sighed.

“I wanted to ask you to be my best man!” Charlie called, and Shane stopped walking again. Charlie stood frozen for a moment; this wasn’t how he’d planned to ask, but then, he hadn’t actually *come up* with a plan, so he supposed it would do. After a long moment, Shane turned slowly around, an expression of deep confusion on his face.

“Best man?” he repeated, as though he didn’t speak English.

“Yeah.”

He pointed at himself, his brows furrowing further. Charlie was starting to wonder if his face might stick that way. *“Me?”*

“Who else do you think I’m talking to?” Charlie asked, gesturing to the empty square. Shane took a step back toward him, which he was going to consider a good sign.

“I’m—you’re serious,” he said cautiously, as though Charlie might shout *gotcha!* at any moment. “You want me. To be your best man.”

“Of course I do,” Charlie said, more gently. “We’re best friends, aren’t we?”

Shane went on staring at him, long enough that Charlie began to worry he was having a stroke. What were the signs, again? Harvey had taught him the acronym, something like FACE, or wait, was it FAST? He looked up again, thinking maybe he should go fetch Harvey from the clinic, and received the shock of his life. A single tear had spilled down Shane’s face, his eyes red and mouth tight. The farmer’s entire brain filled with jangling alarm bells.

“Oh, hey, it’s—” *okay,* Charlie had meant to say, but Shane had crossed the distance between them in two steps and wrapped him in a hug. Charlie, flooded with relief, put his arms around Shane’s back and held on for a long moment. Unlike that time in the chicken coop, Shane didn’t seem desperate to pull away, and so Charlie waited for him to compose himself. None of this was going the way he’d expected—in no alternate universe had he even considered the possibility that he could make Shane *cry,* he’d only ever seen that on the night on the cliff—but he thought maybe it was going well anyway? Maybe better than he’d hoped?

At last, Shane stepped backward, scrubbing the sleeve of his hoodie over his eyes. He gave a single deep sniff, shoving his hands back in his pockets. “I, um,” he began, his voice wavering; Charlie felt a prickling at his own eyes and shoved it away. They couldn’t *both* stand around weeping in the middle of the square. “I think...you’re bad at picking friends, Charlie.”

Charlie felt a pang in his chest. He sometimes wondered why none of the people he loved seemed capable of loving themselves. Maybe he had a type. “Who the fuck is ‘Charlie’?” he asked, and Shane looked up at him in confusion. “That’s *farm boy* to you.”

Shane let out a watery laugh, smiling at the ground. “Sorry, I forgot.”

“So is that a yes?”

“I’m...I would be...it’s, um…” Shane took a deep breath, exhaling forcefully as though to get rid of all the excess emotion. “Yes. Thank you.”

“No need to thank me. There’s nobody else I’d rather have up there with me. You know how much you mean to me, I hope.”

“That’s why I’m thanking you,” Shane said quietly.

They stood for a long moment, absorbing it all, and then by some unspoken agreement, they turned and began walking again. Charlie let his elbow bump against Shane’s arm, and Shane bumped back, communicating what both of them were so terrible at putting in words.

“You don’t have to make a speech,” Charlie offered.

“I’ll make a speech if I want to make a speech,” Shane snapped, and Charlie laughed.

“Okay, then. You can make a speech.”

“I’m not making a fucking speech.”

“I know.”

* * * * *

“Morning, Maru,” Harvey called as he pushed through the door, “sorry I’m late.” He’d actually been late the last few days, but since Maru had been off since the afternoon of the proposal, she didn’t need to know that. It was just *so hard* to get out of bed these days, for some reason.

“Good morning,” she called absently back, poking at the computer. He hovered over the desk for a moment, wondering when she would notice his new accessory, but her eyes seemed oddly glued to her work. Moving around the desk to the coffee pot, he glanced at her screen. It was just the patient schedule for the day, nothing interesting; why wouldn’t she look at him?

“You’re awfully focused,” he remarked, and she raised her eyebrows without looking away from the screen.

“Just trying to get some work done. Need something?”

Harvey sighed, deflating a little. “No,” he mumbled, “I’ll be in the back.” As he turned to leave, she spoke again.

“I mean,” she said airily, “if there was something you wanted to tell me, this could wait.” He looked back at her and saw that she was fighting down a smirk, still not looking at him. A deep suspicion rose up in him.

“What would I want to tell you?”

“I don’t know. You tell me.”

“Do you know something?”

“Depends. Is there something to know?”

Harvey stood directly behind her, hands planted on his hips and a mock-stern expression on his face. “Maru.”

At last, she turned around, scowling hard to disguise the smile trying to break across her face. “Harvey.”

They stared each other down for a long moment, both struggling not to be the first to crack, and finally Harvey caved. Grinning, he burst out, “I’m getting married!”

“Yes!” Maru shrieked, jumping to her feet and throwing her arms around his neck. Harvey squeezed her, trying to contain his excitement. Nobody wanted to see a nearly forty-year-old man acting like a hyperactive child, even if he *did* feel like one. But then Maru pulled back from the hug and seized him by both hands, bouncing up and down with excitement, and he thought *oh, fuck it* before joining her. They danced around for a moment, giggling in a thoroughly unprofessional way, before settling down and falling into a hug again.

“Oh, doc, I’m so happy for you. Sam came over last night and told Seb. I *knew* it was going to work out.”

“You’re very wise,” Harvey agreed, ruffling her hair before releasing her and reaching for the coffee pot. As he sipped, she reached up, lifting the delicate shell away from his throat.

“It’s so pretty,” she marveled, tilting it to catch the light. “I wonder what chemical composition causes that iridescent effect. Maybe I could—”

“I’m *not* letting you run tests on my engagement necklace, Maru.”

“I wouldn’t need the whole thing. Maybe just a little scraping?”

“Absolutely not. Convince the old mariner you’re hopelessly in love with some poor soul and get your own, why don’t you.”

Maru snorted, dropping the shell and leaning back on the desk. “Nobody’s stupid enough to believe *that.”* She grinned wickedly at Harvey, lifting her own mug to her lips. “Though apparently the village elders all thought I’d be just *heartbroken* when you started dating Charlie. I got a lot of sympathetic looks and shoulder pats that first week.”

Harvey sighed, pressing a hand to his heart. “I’m sorry. It’s cruel of me to flaunt my happiness in front of you,” he intoned. “You know you’re the other love of my life.”

Maru laughed, aiming a kick at his shins. “I like Engaged Harvey. Is Married Harvey going to be this sassy?”

“We’ll find out, I guess,” Harvey grinned, “in about a month.”

“Oh! You’ve got it all planned already?”

“Just about. We’ve talked to most of the people involved. We just need to decide on our attendants.”

“Oh?” Maru said with an air of careful nonchalance, and Harvey’s grin softened.

“Come *on,* Maru. You can’t honestly think I’d ask anyone else.” She looked at him with wide, shining eyes, and he reached out to take her hand. “Be my, um...wait, what do you even call it? Is it a maid of honor when it’s for a groom? Best woman?”

“Best woman,” Maru said firmly, and Harvey nodded.

“Best woman it is. Will you?”

Maru squeezed his hand, beaming beneath damp eyes. “Of course I will. What the hell have you done to me?” she demanded, laughing. “I don’t *cry* about *weddings.”*

“I cried enough on you last time. It’s your turn.”

There were no patients scheduled for the morning, so they took their coffee to the OR, settling cross-legged on the beds. “You know,” Maru said thoughtfully, “we’ve never really done the whole ‘dating talk’ thing. I mean you told me about that one hot air balloon date, but usually we talk about science, or books, or…”

“General nerd stuff,” Harvey supplied, and Maru nodded.

“General nerd stuff. Which is great, but are we, I don’t know, missing out? Penny tells me about all of her dates. I’d probably tell her, too, if I went on any.”

“Penny goes on dates?” Harvey asked, intrigued, but Maru shook her head.

“Strictly confidential. And not the point.”

Harvey tilted his head, considering. “I don’t really know what else to tell you.”

“Tell me about the last date you two went on.”

“Um.” Harvey racked his brain, thinking back to before the argument. “We had a picnic in the woods. Charlie made dinner.”

“That sounds nice. What else did you do?”

The answer was that they’d given each other a quick but highly satisfying round of mutual handjobs on the picnic blanket, but Harvey didn’t think Maru wanted those kinds of details. “I, um, I’m not sure you want to know.”

“Yoba, *no,* please. No.” She shook herself, and Harvey smirked. “A different one, then. What was the last one before that?”

“That would have been...Oh! The Flower Dance. You know what that one was like.”

Maru brightened, remembering. “Oh, yeah! That was so cute, how he showed up to dance with you. But you guys left so early! What happened?”

“...You don’t want to know,” Harvey admitted sheepishly.

“Seriously, are you two just going at it *all the time?”* Harvey blinked, and she threw her hands up. *“Don’t* answer that. I thought you were nice boys. This was a terrible idea.”

“You asked!”

“I regret it.” Maru unfolded her legs, heading for the door, and Harvey laughed.

“But you’ll still be my best woman, right?”

“Duh. I’ll talk to you at the wedding.” She shook her head as she walked, and tossed over her shoulder, “Maybe not before then.”

* * * * *

“Charlie!” A tiny blur of pink blouse and brown hair shot out of the house, flinging herself into Charlie’s arms. He caught his mother with a laugh, spinning her before setting her down on the well-manicured lawn.

“Hi, Mom,” he said, as she pulled back to look him up and down. Her mouth dropped open in shock, and her green eyes darted back up to meet Charlie’s.

“I barely recognize my own son! You’re so skinny, and so *tan!”*

“Farming will do that to you,” Charlie pointed out, and reached a hand behind him to draw Harvey forward. Smiling up at his fiancé encouragingly, he said, “Harvey, this is my mother, Alice. Mom, this is Harvey.”

“Oh, your friend from the Valley,” Charlie’s mother said blithely, and he raised an eyebrow at her. Were they really going to do this, then?

“Actually, Mom, Harvey’s my—”

“Come in, come in! No need to stand around on the doorstep,” she insisted, tugging at the handle of their suitcase despite his protests. Charlie rolled his eyes at Harvey, who looked placidly back at him. Sighing, he crossed the threshold into the house, Harvey following close behind him.

Charlie had done his best, over the course of the last few days, to warn Harvey about his mother. She existed for Charlie in a sort of weird liminal space where he both loved her very much and never wanted any of his boyfriends to meet her, ever. And now that Harvey was no longer just a boyfriend, the anxiety had multiplied exponentially. She might be tiny and cute, but she could sink those perfectly manicured nails into the softest parts of a person’s psyche without a moment’s hesitation. He genuinely had no idea what to expect from her about their engagement. Would she keep pretending Harvey was just Charlie’s overly affectionate roommate? Or would she finally give up the ghost and be happy for them?

“I made brownies,” she called down the hall as she bustled ahead to the kitchen, “and of course I’ll make us something for lunch, I wasn’t sure what you’d like so I got the stuff for a few different things, we can do—”

“Mom, Mom, relax,” Charlie laughed, grinning in spite of his nerves. “We just got in the door, you don’t have to start feeding us right this second. Neither of us is going to starve in the next five minutes.”

“You wouldn’t know it to look at you,” she sniffed, and turned her gaze on Harvey. “This one looks like a stiff breeze could blow him away! Do you like chicken or roast beef, Harvey?”

“I like both of them, um…”

“Oh, just call me Alice. No need to be formal.”

“Alice. Thank you.”

When she’d finally settled across from the two of them at the kitchen table, coffee and brownies scattered between them, she waved a hand in the air. “So what brings you back to visit?” she asked, taking a sip of her coffee. “Of course I’m thrilled to see you, honey, but you haven’t been back in a whole year.”

“I thought it was time to fix that,” Charlie said sheepishly. He honestly *hadn’t* meant to be away that long, but once he’d gotten settled in the Valley, it had been hard to leave. He glanced at Harvey, who still wore a polite smile. “And I wanted you and Harvey to meet.”

“Yes, you’ve told me all about him in your letters,” she said. Charlie felt a glimmer of hope; it was the most she’d ever acknowledged hearing about their relationship. “You’re a doctor, aren’t you, Harvey?”

“Yes, I am.”

They made small talk for a few minutes, Harvey answering her barrage of questions while Charlie mostly listened and chimed in occasionally. It seemed to be going...well? Charlie outed Harvey as a secret ABBA fan, which thrilled his mother, and told Harvey about the time he’d caught his mom ugly-crying over an episode of *Star Trek.* They were getting along so well, Charlie almost forgot to be petrified of what would come out of her mouth. Charlie retold the story of how Harvey had fixed up Bones on his kitchen table, and his mother got her first dig in at the Valley.

“Still no vet in town, hmm?” she asked, in tones of satisfaction. “I guess it hasn’t changed much.”

“I wouldn’t know,” Charlie said testily, “since we never went to visit when I was a kid.”

“Are you from the Valley, Harvey?” she asked, totally ignoring Charlie, and he shook his head.

“I was born not far from here, actually,” he said, and Charlie wanted to wave his arms shouting *ABORT, ABORT.* Predictably, his mother’s face lit up in a calculating way.

“Oh, a city boy! Well, I’m sure you must miss it here. Many more opportunities for a doctor in the city than in a place as small as Pelican Town.”

“Well,” Harvey said, and glanced at Charlie, “actually, I’ve really come to love it there. The work isn’t as glamorous as my old practice, maybe, but it’s nice to be needed.”

Good boy, Charlie thought, nudging his foot against Harvey’s under the table. His mother slumped back in her chair, clearly disappointed to have lost a potential ally. There was a lull in the conversation, and though it didn’t seem the best moment, Charlie wasn’t sure when he’d get an opportunity.

“Mom,” he began, taking a deep breath, “we have some news.”

“Oh! So do I!” she said brightly, sitting forward again and clasping her hands together. “I’m going on a trip! Marjorie and Ellen invited me to the Calico Desert for a long weekend. Just a girls’ getaway. It’ll be so nice to go somewhere sunny for a while.”

“That’s great, Mom,” he sighed.

“Of course, Marjorie wanted to invite Susan, but you know Ellen and Susan don’t get along ever since that last incident…” Charlie gave up for the moment, settling in to hear about the intricacies of her friend group. Under the table, Harvey gave his knee a reassuring squeeze, and he returned it. They could tell her later; they had all day, after all.

Only, it started to seem as though Charlie’s mother was actively dodging what he wanted to say. Over a lunch of roast beef sandwiches, he tried again, only for her to bustle off to get more napkins. He tried after they’d finished eating, on the couch in the living room, and she’d interrupted him with a story about the upholsterer she’d hired to redo it. He made one more attempt an hour later, but she’d excused herself to use the restroom almost before he’d started talking. It was as though she was trying to run out the clock, trapping them in Small Talk Hell until the visit was over.

“Seriously, how does she keep avoiding it?” Charlie hissed at Harvey as they waited for her to return from the bathroom. “Does she *know* what I’m going to say?”

“I imagine she does,” Harvey murmured. “You might just have to kind of...ambush her. Get it out before she has a chance to stop you.”

“Yeah, you’re right. When she comes back, I’ll—”

“Sorry about that,” she said breathlessly, settling into her armchair and tucking her feet up beneath her. “Where were we?”

“Right about here,” Charlie said. Very deliberately, he reached for Harvey’s hand, intertwining their fingers on the sofa cushion. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw his mother’s posture stiffen just slightly. *Here goes nothing.*

“Mom, Harvey and I are getting married,” he announced. He plastered his biggest, sunniest smile on his face, because even if his mom was insisting on being weird about it, it was *good*

news and he was happy, dammit. Looking up, he saw that Harvey was smiling back at him, slightly pink in the face. He squeezed Harvey's hand, and received a squeeze back in return. When he turned back to his mother, she had a smile on her face, but not one Charlie liked. It was an expression she usually wore when looking at a friend's tacky new decor: politely indulgent, but appalled underneath. Charlie had told himself he wouldn't care how she reacted; the drop in his stomach suggested otherwise.

"How nice," she said at last, unfolding her legs. "Can I get either of you more coffee?"

"More—did you hear what I said?"

"Of course I did. I'm not hard of hearing yet, I'm not *that* old." She tittered over this a little, throwing a conspiratorial look at Harvey that said, *boys!*

"Mom."

"I'll go ahead and make some more anyway," she announced, getting back to her feet. "I could use another cup myself." As Charlie sat staring, open-mouthed, she breezed from the room.

And all at once, Charlie was *pissed.*

He shot to his feet, dropping Harvey's hand and following her into the kitchen. Behind him, he could hear Harvey saying his name, but Charlie's ears were ringing with indignation. He stormed after her, finding her standing at the counter with her back to him. She wasn't making coffee.

"Mother," he ground out, in as patient a tone as he could manage, *"what* is going on, exactly? I tell you I'm getting married, and you don't even respond?"

She braced her hands on the countertop, shoulder blades bunching up behind her. Once upon a time, that posture would have given Charlie a deep sense of *I fucked up.* Now, it just made him angrier; he wasn't a child anymore. "I have to say," she said at last, "I'm surprised. I always thought you would take marriage more seriously."

This was so far outside the realm of Charlie's expectations that he couldn't find words for a moment. "I—wha—seriously? Who says I'm not?"

"Oh, come on, Charlie," she sighed, turning around and folding her arms over her chest. She looked disinterested, almost bored, but he knew better; this was a defense mechanism. "You two have been dating for less than a year. You barely know that man."

"That man is the most incredible person I've ever met," Charlie spat, his indignation rising. "We've been friends for over a year, and I've fallen more in love with him every day. I know him *very* well, thank you."

"Yes, yes, I'm sure he's lovely," she said, waving a hand lazily in the air. "I'm just saying, honey, you're jumping into this very quickly, and you're still young. He's much older than you; it makes sense that he's in a rush, but you don't have to—"

“That’s enough,” Charlie interrupted, in a voice like iron. “Listen to me, Mom. If you want to have a relationship with me, *any* relationship, you will not disrespect the man I love. Not if you want to be involved in my life.”

“How can I be involved in your life? You moved to the middle of nowhere!”

“The guilt trip isn’t going to work. I moved a train ride away. You can come see me *anytime,* but you won’t.”

“You haven’t been back here, either,” she accused, and the jab hit home. *Don’t get distracted,* Charlie admonished himself.

“You’re right, and I’ll do better, but I have a life in the Valley, Mom. I have a home, and friends, and work that matters to me—”

“Okay, well, you enjoy your new life,” she sniffed, cutting him off. “When you get tired of playing *Little House on the Prairie,* your *old* life will be here.”

Charlie was so taken aback, he couldn’t speak; his mouth opened and closed like a fish, searching for words. He couldn’t believe she’d actually said such a thing. Oh, sure, she was constantly pestering him to come back in her letters. She refused to acknowledge anything he said about the farm, but deep down, he’d still thought she was *proud* of him on some level. He had never imagined this, this total dismissal of everything he’d accomplished. It hurt so, so much more than he’d expected.

“Okay,” he managed at last, the single word rasping out of his suddenly dry throat. There was a warm pressure just above his elbow, and he looked up: Harvey had finally come into the room, standing at his side with a hand on his arm. He twisted, seizing Harvey’s hand and pulling him along behind him.

“Let’s go,” he declared, dragging Harvey to the door. “We’re leaving.” Apparently his tone brooked no argument, because Harvey didn’t protest and neither did his mother. His last glimpse of her was of her back again, arms wrapped around herself as she stared out the window.

“I cannot *believe* her,” Charlie seethed for the fifth time, pacing around their hastily-rented hotel room. Harvey watched him warily, leaning against the bathroom door jamb.

“I know, honey.”

“How could she—why would she—”

“I don’t know.”

“She acted like I was a five-year-old playing house!”

“I know.”

He whirled around, facing Harvey. “And you know what, she can be as big of an asshole as she wants to *me,* but she isn’t allowed to talk shit about *you.* That’s crossing the line.”

“It doesn’t matter what she says about me,” Harvey said, but Charlie shook his head vehemently.

“It *does.* It matters. She should love you, not…” He trailed off, unable to put his feelings into words. Suddenly, he needed to touch Harvey, ached to have him in his arms again. Why had they come here, why weren’t they at home right now? He reached out, cradling Harvey’s face in his hands. “How could she not love you?”

Harvey trapped Charlie’s hands against his face, closing his eyes and nosing against Charlie’s palm. “She loves *you,”* he said, pressing a kiss there, “and she thinks I’m wrong for you.”

“That’s ridiculous. A, you’re exactly right for me, and B, I’m a grown man, I can make my own choices.”

“I didn’t say I agreed with her assessment,” Harvey reassured him, offering a small smile. Charlie wished he could return it, but he still felt too raw, too wounded. Harvey took a breath as though he were about to speak, then let it back out without saying anything. Charlie tilted his head back, searching his face. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Harvey said, and Charlie raised an eyebrow at him. Today was not going according to plan, and things he thought he knew were crashing down all around him, but he still knew that *nothing* from Harvey meant *something.* He waited, and Harvey sighed in resignation. “I hate that I’m causing a rift between you and your mother,” he admitted at last. Charlie shook his head so hard, it almost hurt his neck.

“No,” he said firmly, and meant it. Whatever damage his mother did, he wouldn’t let her hurt Harvey. “If there’s a rift, it’s because *she* put it there. Not you.” He went up on tiptoes, kissing Harvey on the mouth, sweet and soft. “You were perfect today, like always. Whatever’s going on with her, it’s not your fault.”

“I just want you to be happy,” Harvey said quietly.

“I am,” Charlie whispered, kissing him again. And once more, just for good measure. “I will be, no matter what. Even if she doesn’t come to the wedding, I’ll still be over the moon.” He felt a smile come to his face at last, slow and genuine. “How could I not be? I’m marrying you.”

Harvey looked at him, those beautiful green eyes shining, and then pulled him into a tight embrace; they stood, holding each other, for what felt like a very long time. Charlie felt some of the stress of the day leave him. His mother had let him down badly, and he missed Bones and the farm, but all was not lost. He still had Harvey, warm and solid and dependable, right here in his arms. He let that warmth seep into his bones, and suddenly he felt exhausted, though it was only dinnertime.

“I think I need an angry nap,” he sighed, separating from Harvey at last. “If you don’t mind waiting a while for dinner.”

“Not at all. I’m not so sleepy, though, and I don’t want to keep you up. Will you be okay if I go for a little walk?”

Charlie squinted at him, trying to suss out whether he really just wanted a walk or he was hiding some emotions about the whole thing, but he seemed...fine? He didn’t look upset, at any rate, smiling at Charlie and running a hand down his arm. With effort, Charlie decided to stop second-guessing everything Harvey said, and nodded.

“Sure. I’ll get up in like an hour, and we can get some dinner?”

“Sounds good.” Harvey leaned in to kiss him on the forehead, and Charlie swayed into the touch. For some reason, he didn’t want Harvey to go. “I’ll see you soon, honey.”

“Bye, V.”

* * * * *

This was a mistake.

Harvey *knew* it was a mistake, had known since the instant he left the hotel room, but his conscience wouldn’t leave him alone. He’d nearly asked the driver to turn around four times on the brief cab ride here, but instead he’d sat silently, simmering in anxiety. *For Charlie, for Charlie,* he’d chanted in his mind, though he wasn’t actually sure Charlie would want him to do this at all.

But now it was all a moot point, because he stood on the front step of Alice’s home, sweating under his cardigan and waiting for her to answer his knock. He half-hoped she would’ve gone out in the two hours since they’d left, but Yoba proved as unmerciful as ever, and the door swung open. Alice looked different than when he’d last seen her; her eyes looked a little puffy, and she’d wrapped a long, fluffy sweater over her clothes. For a moment she looked surprised to see him, but she composed herself quickly, standing silently aside to let him in.

“Hello again, Alice,” Harvey said politely, stepping inside the doorway. “I’m sorry to drop by unannounced, I hope I’m not interrupting anything.”

“I’ve got a suggestion, Harvey,” she said, in a tone completely unlike her earlier bubbly one. She started down the hallway to the kitchen, and after a moment of hesitation, Harvey followed in her wake. “Since my son isn’t here, why don’t we drop the polite act and say what we actually want to say?”

Harvey was taken aback; he’d expected more of the same dancing around that they’d all done that morning. While the prospect of an Alice with her gloves off frankly scared the shit out of him, he had to admit he was intrigued to get to the bottom of the issue. “Perfect,” he said, with a nonchalance he definitely didn’t feel. She gestured for him to sit down at the table, while she went and fetched a pair of mugs. Harvey did his best to steel himself while she made tea, accepting the mug with a murmured thanks as she dropped into the seat across from him.

Alice studied him for a moment, and Harvey felt as though she were planning the opening moves of a chess game. “So,” she began, leaning forward on her elbows. “Did Charlie send you to talk to me?”

“No.” The truth was obviously going to be the safest option; he had the distinct impression that she could see right through him. “He doesn’t know I’m here, actually.”

“Aren’t you worried he’ll be angry if he finds out?”

“Yes. I am.”

Her eyes narrowed, and Harvey did his best to look open and uncalculating. “Why *did* you come back, then?”

Harvey took a sip of his too-hot tea, reaching mentally for the script he’d composed on the way there. “I think it was clear earlier that my relationship with Charlie bothers you,” he said, and she didn’t bother to contradict him. “What’s less clear to me is why. I’m hoping to understand, and set your mind at ease, if I can.”

Alice sat back in the chair, looking down at her tea. She swirled the mug gently, a tendril of steam still hanging in the air above it. “Charlie’s never brought a boyfriend home before,” she said, “but he’s had a lot.”

“I see.”

“A *lot,”* she emphasized, looking up at him, as though expecting him to be—curious? Shocked? Harvey wasn’t sure. Whatever reaction she’d been looking for, he wasn’t going to give it to her.

“I know his history,” he countered, “and he knows mine.”

“It doesn’t bother you that he’s dated dozens of people?”

“It doesn’t bother him that I’ve only dated two,” he said simply, and her eyebrows went up in surprise. Harvey felt a petty rush of satisfaction for having caught her off-guard.

“I guess I just don’t understand why you have to get married so quickly,” she said, changing the topic completely. “You just met. Why not take your time?”

“We met over a year ago,” Harvey corrected her, “and honestly, I loved him almost from the beginning. I didn’t need long to figure it out.” He let his gaze soften a little, trying to communicate how he felt, let her see that it was genuine. “I don’t see any reason to wait. I already know I want to spend the rest of my life with him.”

“So you thought you’d propose and get it locked down right away,” she supplied, a lightly mocking tone to her voice, and Harvey smiled. She was going to *love* this one.

“Actually, Charlie proposed to me,” he said, tugging the mermaid’s pendant out of his collar and holding it up. “Did he not mention that?”

If the conversation was a chess game, *that* had been at least a rook or a bishop in Harvey's favor; Alice looked stunned. She reached across the table and touched the point of the shell, lightly, as though confirming it was real; then she drew her hand back as though it had burned her. Harvey gave her a moment to formulate her next move, sitting back and sipping at his tea. He knew they hadn't scratched the surface of the real issue yet, but he also had the sense that if he pushed her, she'd shut him down completely.

Apparently, she'd decided to change tactics again. "You're a lot older than Charlie," Alice said bluntly. Harvey didn't bat an eyelash; he'd expected this line of offense.

"I am. A little over ten years."

"Couldn't find a boyfriend your own age?"

"Charlie found me, actually."

"And you said yes."

"He's very persuasive."

"He must be, if he convinced you to marry him after six months," Alice said dryly. Harvey sighed; they were going in circles, and he needed to leave within the next fifteen minutes if he didn't want Charlie to get suspicious. He decided to cut straight to the chase.

"I'm going to guess that your problem with me isn't actually about my age, Alice, or even about the speed of the engagement. Do you want to tell me what it really is?" She glared at him, bristling, and he softened his tone. "Please."

After a long, intense stare-down, Alice glanced away, as though the answer to the question was written on the wall beside Harvey's head. "Charlie is an only child," she began. "My husband died years ago, and I always thought Charlie would stay in the city, that I'd have him nearby." As though it had just occurred to her, she fixed a fierce look on Harvey, pointing. "I'm *not* some kind of crazy Mrs. Bates type," she insisted. "I always knew he would grow up and move on, but I didn't expect...I didn't think he'd go *there."*

"To your hometown?" Harvey prodded gently, and she nodded.

"You live there, Harvey, but you didn't grow up there. It was suffocating. Everyone in each other's business all the time, nothing to do, nowhere to go. I got out the first chance I could, and I promised myself I'd never go back."

Harvey mulled this over. It didn't line up with what Charlie had told him, that his mother had never liked the city. He wondered which was the true version of events. Maybe Alice had been convincing herself of her own version for so long, she'd forgotten Charlie's. "I'm sorry you had that experience," he said at last, deciding not to push too hard. "But Charlie doesn't see it that way. Neither do I, for what it's worth."

Alice sighed through her nose, a sound of impatience. "Of course he doesn't see it that way. He's got you. He'll never come home *now,"* she said, tapping her nails on the table. "He'll

stay in town for you."

Ah, and there it was, the real root of the issue. Harvey wasn't particularly surprised, but he was relieved to have it out in the open at last. Still, there were misconceptions that needed to be cleared up.

"You're mistaken," Harvey said firmly. "It's not for me."

"Oh, no?" she scoffed.

"I have never had a family, Alice, in my entire life. Believe me when I say I would never, ever, intentionally separate Charlie from his." He swallowed, working to keep the emotion out of his voice. "I would move here tomorrow if it's what he wanted. He'll stay because he's built something incredible, something of his own, something he's proud of. He's built a home there, and yes, I—I'm part of that. But I could be part of it no matter where we lived, I'd follow him anywhere. It's the farm that keeps him there."

"The farm," she repeated tiredly.

"Yes, the farm. If you came to visit, you'd be amazed at what your son has built. I know you would. It's beautiful, Alice."

"I can't do that."

"So you've said. Why? What's the danger in just visiting?"

"That place is a black hole," Alice said, a distinct note of bitterness in her tone. "People fall in and end up stuck there forever. Nothing happens, nothing *changes* there."

"I think we'll have to disagree on that," Harvey said gently. "I changed. So did Charlie."

She glanced sharply at him, and it occurred to Harvey that saying her son had changed was likely the exact opposite of what she'd wanted to hear, but it was true. The Charlie who'd first set foot in Pelican Town had been charming and determined, but a year on the farm had transformed him. His confidence was no longer rooted in his innate social graces, but in having taken on something difficult and *done* it. He was self-assured and proud of himself, and Harvey had never seen anything so beautiful.

And of course, Harvey was different, too. He'd stumbled into town in ruins, and bit by bit had rebuilt himself (with some help from his friends). Perhaps his new self had been a little fragile, a little shaky, but he'd survived and persevered. And then along had come Charlie, and his love had strengthened Harvey so much he barely recognized himself. He was proud of them both, he realized. They'd come a long way.

"Come to our wedding," he said abruptly, before she could plan another attack. Alice looked totally taken aback, leaning away from the table in surprise. "Come see the farm, and the town. You'll understand then."

"You can't possibly want me at your wedding," she protested. "I've been awful to you."

“First impressions aren’t everything,” Harvey said, offering a little smile. “I love your son, Alice, more than you can imagine. And he loves you.” He took a deep breath, gathering his courage. “I’d really like for you to come.”

He didn’t know Alice well enough to read all her expressions, not really. But for a moment, the look in her eyes almost made him believe he’d convinced her. She looked as though she were fighting with herself, battling her old convictions against her love for Charlie. Under the table, Harvey dug his fingers into his own knee, telling himself *shut up shut up don’t ruin it, almost there.*

“No,” she said at last, and Harvey felt as though he’d been doused with cold water. “I’m sorry, but no. I can’t go back there, Harvey. I burned all those bridges long ago.”

“I see,” Harvey replied, trying to keep his voice steady. “I’m disappointed to hear that, Alice, but of course it’s your call.”

“You had to know I wasn’t going to say yes,” she pressed, looking at him over the rim of her mug. Harvey was sure the tea had gone cold long ago—his own certainly had—but he understood the importance of a good prop. “Why did you come here and ask?”

“Because it would make Charlie happy if you came,” he said simply. “And if all I ever accomplish is that I make his life a little bit happier, I’ll consider my time well spent.”

Alice’s expression wavered. “That’s quite a line,” she said at last, the corner of her mouth twitching up.

Harvey laughed softly, toying with the handle of his mug. “He brings out my poetic side,” he admitted. “It’s pretty disgusting, honestly.”

They chuckled together about this for a moment, and then Alice leaned back in her chair. “Well, damn,” she sighed. “And here I was hoping he’d bring home someone I could really hate.”

“Sorry to disappoint,” he quipped, and she laughed again. Harvey checked his watch under the table. He *really* needed to go; Charlie was going to start wondering where the hell he’d disappeared to. “Look, Alice, I need to be getting back to Charlie. Would you…” He stood and hesitated, not wanting to disturb the brief détente. “You don’t have to commit to anything, and I promise not to say anything to Charlie. But would you just...think about it? Just consider my invitation.”

Alice stood as well, not meeting his eyes, and sighed. “I’ll think about it,” she agreed at last, wrapping her cardigan more tightly around herself. They headed toward the front door, and Alice paused in front of it, glancing up at him from beneath her lashes. The look reminded him so much of Charlie, it was startling to see it on another person. “This might sound strange, but...I’m sort of glad you came back, Harvey. I can see why he likes you.”

Considering where they’d started, Harvey was inclined to consider this a great compliment. He summoned his courage again and gave her upper arm a little pat, aiming for *affectionate, but not too personal.* “I’m glad I came too. I hope I’ll see you soon.”

The door closed behind him, and Harvey fought the urge to fall against it; getting through that conversation had taken every ounce of emotional fortitude he had, and he wasn't even sure it had really accomplished anything. Maybe Alice would take him up on his invitation, and maybe she wouldn't. But that would come later. For now, he would return to the hotel. He'd collect his fiancé, pull him into his arms, take him out to a nice dinner. They would talk and laugh, and walk through the spring evening together, and then if Harvey was lucky they'd return to the room and take each other slowly apart. And then they would go home, and in a few short weeks, they'd get married.

And whether Alice came or not, Harvey couldn't help feeling that everything would be perfect anyway.

Chapter End Notes

And there's the drama with Charlie's mom! No fun for poor Charlie, but at least he and Harvey are solid again.

Thanks so much for your kind and thoughtful comments. A lot of you have mentioned looking forward to these chapters each day during social distancing, and I just wanted to say that I really look forward to posting them, too. Take care of yourselves! <3

Tomorrow: a wedding, and a wedding night.

Chapter 21: Summer, Year 2

Chapter Summary

A wedding, and what comes after.

Chapter Notes

This probably comes as no surprise, but this chapter contains NSFW content!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

In two rooms across the square of Pelican Town, two men put on two identical light-gray suits. They tied identical black brogues on their feet, pinned identical pink sweet pea boutonnieres to their jackets, and tucked *nearly* identical—if slightly different-sized—hammered white-gold rings into their inner pockets. They were both adorned with neckties by their attendants, but neither the neckties nor the attendants were identical.

In the back room of the town's saloon, a gruff man in a black suit swore as he attempted to wrangle a bowtie onto a farmer's neck. The tie was deep green and embroidered with tiny dogs, and the farmer's hands hovered uselessly in midair as the gruff man struggled with it.

"Why the fuck did you pick a *bowtie,"* the gruff man growled, right as the farmer moaned, "Why the fuck did I pick a *bowtie?"* Neither had an answer to the question.

In the front room of the town's clinic, a pretty young woman in a black cocktail dress smiled as she finished tightening the knot of a slim necktie around a doctor's collar. The tie was deep green and embroidered with tiny airplanes, and brought out the color of the doctor's eyes. The young woman told him so.

"I still can't get over seeing you like this," the doctor said, holding her away at arm's length. He had never before seen her without her glasses or in such fancy clothes; he doubted anyone in town ever had. "I mean, don't get me wrong, you're always beautiful. But you look…"

The young woman winked at him, tossing her head. "I know!" she agreed, and they both laughed. "You clean up pretty well yourself, Doc."

Outside, two dozen villagers sat in wooden chairs, chattering and facing a flower-draped arbor. The town's mayor complimented the elderly woman who had grown the flowers, who blushed and insisted she'd been glad to do it. A willowy blonde woman flitted around with a camera, taking photos of the flowers and the assembled guests. Only one chair sat empty;

there were no assigned sides, since all the couple's friends were mutual, but the chair belonged to an absent guest of the farmer. (Though, technically, it was the doctor who had extended the invitation.)

In the saloon, tie-wrangling finished, the gruff man checked his watch and announced to the farmer that it was just about time. The farmer's face lit up, and he seized the gruff man into a hug, which was accepted gruffly.

In the clinic, the young woman glanced at the clock on the wall and announced to the doctor that it was time. The doctor grinned with an air of nervous excitement and hugged her; she hugged back, rocking him a little. Then, they released each other, took a deep breath, and opened the door.

* * * * *

Harvey had lost a game of rock-paper-scissors.

Faced with deciding who would walk down the aisle—they'd decided on both—and in what order, they had spent days trying to come up with some kind of logical system. In the end, Charlie had barked out an exasperated "fuck it," thrust out a fist, and announced that the winner got to choose whether they walked down the aisle first or second. Charlie had won, Harvey had lost, and then he'd spent the next week picturing himself standing up in front of the whole town while he waited for Charlie. He knew it shouldn't make him anxious—these were his friends, and it was his wedding, it was a happy occasion!—but there were just going to be so many *eyes* on him. He could handle it with Charlie beside him, but it felt like a lot to bear alone.

He hadn't mentioned his distress to Charlie, determined to manage this one small thing his fiancé had asked of him. But now, pushing open the door to the clinic and preparing to step out into the late afternoon sunshine, he saw Shane standing outside. Ever the catastrophizer, his first thought was that something was wrong—oh Yoba, had Charlie changed his mind?—but Shane held his hands up, smirking, before he could get a word out.

"Don't panic," he said, "everything's fine. Just a minor change of plans. Maru…" Shane trailed off as he caught sight of Maru for the first time, and his eyes traveled down her body in a painfully obvious way. "Wow, dude. You look, um...wow."

Maru rolled her eyes, but Harvey thought he saw a tint to her cheeks. "Change of plans?" he prompted, because it seemed like Shane might just stand there repeating "wow" all day if an adult didn't intervene.

"Right! Yeah. Maru, you and I are going to walk down the aisle first. Together. Let's go." Maru accepted this without complaint, looping her arm through Shane's, and Harvey felt a spike of irrational panic.

"Wait!" he hissed as they walked away, trying not to draw the attention of the seated villagers. "What about me, what am I doing?"

“You’re coming with me.” Harvey whipped his head to the left, in the direction of the Stardrop, and felt his mouth go dry. There was Charlie, striding towards him with his hands in his pockets, looking impossibly handsome in his tailored wedding suit. He’d pushed his spill of hair out of his face, sweeping it back from his hairline, and Harvey would barely have recognized him if not for the easy grin on his face. As he approached Harvey, he didn’t break momentum, just slipped an arm around the doctor’s waist and tugged him back inside the clinic door.

“I...wha...I thought I was waiting for you at the altar,” Harvey said stupidly, unable to pry his eyes from Charlie’s face. Charlie ran his hands up Harvey’s arms, catching his face in both hands and pulling it down to brush their noses together.

“The more I thought about it,” Charlie murmured, “the more I realized I didn’t want us to see each other for the first time in front of all those people. I wanted to take a second just for us.” He drew back, looking Harvey up and down with his hands on his shoulders. “God, darlin’, you look...well, I wish we didn’t have to go out there and be respectable in thirty seconds.”

Harvey was never going to make it through this day with dry eyes, he realized. They hadn’t even started the *ceremony* yet, and already there was a lump in his throat. He hadn’t told Charlie what he needed, but somehow Charlie had known anyway, because of course he had. He cupped the back of Charlie’s head, pulling him forward and pressing a gentle kiss to his forehead; he didn’t want to mess up his hair, which must have taken significant effort to tame. Charlie tilted his head a little, still smiling, but undoubtedly wondering why Harvey hadn’t pulled himself together enough to say anything yet.

“I’m sorry,” Harvey managed, half-laughing, “I just... *look* at you. I can’t believe you’re going to marry me.” Charlie’s gaze softened, and he stepped closer, their bodies almost flush. Harvey had to tilt his head down to maintain eye contact, and when he did, Charlie lifted up on tiptoes and brushed his lips against Harvey’s ear.

“I’m gonna marry you,” he whispered, sending a full-body shiver through Harvey. Charlie trailed fingers down his arm and intertwined them with Harvey’s before moving away, leaving their hands joined. “Right now, if that works for you.”

“I checked my calendar,” Harvey laughed, suddenly not anxious at all. “I’m wide open.”

* * * * *

Charlie had never attended a Pelican Town wedding before, but he had to imagine they were kind of a standard affair. Lewis gave his speech to the gathered congregation with the practiced air of having delivered it many times before. Charlie wanted to pay attention, he did, but he was so distracted; Harvey looked devastatingly beautiful, tall and solid beside him. To his left, Shane stood with uncharacteristic seriousness, and to Harvey’s right, Maru looked stunning in her sleek black dress and carefully-styled hair. He felt a sudden rush of warmth, having his little chosen family assembled with him on the biggest day of his life. It was enough to drive away even the sting of his mother’s absence.

Charlie heard Lewis say Harvey’s name, and returned his attention to the proceedings. “When Doctor Harvey first came to town,” he began, eyes creased in a smile, “I thought we were

very lucky to have gotten a big-city doctor to settle in our little village. But I realize now, I didn't know the half of it. Our Harvey is a kind, dutiful, helpful soul, who takes care of all of us and so rarely asks for anything in return." Charlie turned his head enough to see Harvey's face, which was pink and a little misty-looking. "I know I speak for everyone here when I say how happy I am that he has someone to take care of *him* now.

"Which brings us to Charlie." Lewis turned his attention on him, and he felt suddenly, strangely nervous. The mayor grinned, winking at the gathered crowd. "I must admit, when Charlie first arrived, I wasn't sure how things were going to go for him. I mean, most people don't agree to take over a farm without learning a thing or two about farming first." There was a rumble of laughter from the audience, and Charlie rolled his eyes good-naturedly. Lewis would get to the point eventually, he was sure. "But hard work and determination are in his blood, and over the last year we've seen a remarkable transformation. In the old farm, in this young man, and even in our town. I'm proud to say that my first impression was dead wrong."

Charlie wasn't going to cry. He *wasn't.*

"And of course, we all know how these two found each other. We've seen them become friends, and then we've seen that friendship blossom into love. No one who's watched the two of them together can deny that they've built something special. They may have both begun their lives here as outsiders, but today, officially, they are family. To each other, of course, but also to all of us." Lewis lowered his voice, looking between Charlie and Harvey, and smiled warmly at them. "We are all proud to be a part of this day, boys. Will you face each other and join hands?"

They did, and Charlie finally looked into Harvey's face; the tears in his eyes had finally spilled over, but he radiated such joy, it was like staring into the sun. Charlie beamed back at him, squeezing both of his hands and swinging them a little. Sometime, later, he would replay every moment of this day in his mind and savor them. He would think back to all of Lewis's kind words, the smiling faces of their friends, and take his time to linger over them. But right now, all he could focus on was Harvey, beautiful Harvey, Harvey who was looking at him as though he couldn't believe his luck. The feeling was mutual.

Vows were exchanged, repeating after Lewis, words that had been said in Stardew Valley for hundreds of years. Thinking back on it later, Charlie honestly couldn't remember the exact words. His mouth had repeated after Lewis, but his mind had said *I will never stop loving you, not as long as I live. I will take care of you, like I know you'll take care of me. I will kiss you at least ten thousand times, and I'll always need at least one more. I will work every day to make you glad you chose me.*

"Now," Lewis said at last, after they'd finished their vows, "seeing as both the grooms are from Zuzu City, they've decided to honor one tradition from back home. Do you have the rings?"

Charlie reached into the inner pocket of his jacket, feeling for the slender, hammered band. They'd talked about this at length; by Pelican Town tradition, Harvey would keep wearing the mermaid's pendant, and that would be the only physical symbol of their marriage. But Charlie found he didn't like that idea. He wanted something to mark him as Harvey's, too,

not just the other way around. And Harvey almost always wore a tie, so the pendant would rarely be visible. In the end, they'd decided that some traditions existed for a reason, and had commissioned matching rings from Clint. As Harvey slipped one onto his finger, he felt its weight settle into place and knew they'd made the right choice.

"Well, I think I've talked long enough," Lewis said, and the audience chuckled; Charlie was shocked to hear that sentence come out of the mayor's mouth. "Charlie, Harvey. As the mayor of Pelican Town and the bearer of the regional matrimonial seal, I now pronounce you husband and, well...husband!"

He thought they were supposed to wait for an instruction to kiss, but Charlie felt he'd waited an eternity already. He surged up onto his toes, throwing his arms around Harvey's neck and pulling their mouths together; Harvey's arms went immediately around his back, holding him tight. Charlie was vaguely aware of cheering from the crowd, but he was *most* aware of the warmth of Harvey's mouth, the tears on their cheeks, the racing of their hearts. He broke away when he felt something brush his face, and looked up to see handfuls of confetti being flung into the air by the crowd. It spiraled down all around the two of them, filling the air with color; he turned to look back at Harvey, still wrapped in his arms, and saw his head tilted back in laughter. A single pink confetti piece clung to the right lens of his glasses, the same color as his cheeks, and all at once Charlie knew: this was just the beginning. He was going to be this happy for the rest of his life.

* * * * *

Harvey was going to die if he ate one more bite. Gus had pulled out all the stops for their reception, the long Winter Star tables laden with an impossible amount of food. Roast chickens, platters of steak, and piles of potatoes intertwined with Evelyn's lovely flower garlands, all of it lit by criss-crossing strands of string lights and flaming braziers. Harvey didn't have the words to express how moved he was, by all the effort their friends had put into their wedding. It was more than he'd ever dreamed of.

Beside him, Charlie slumped against his shoulder, groaning. "Why did we eat so much?" he complained, twining their fingers together. A shiver of delight ran through Harvey at the feeling of Charlie's ring against his skin, warm and solid. His *husband.* He had a *husband;* he couldn't believe it. Though he knew it wasn't logical—they were the same people they'd been when they'd woken up that morning—Harvey felt subtly changed, somehow. He supposed some small, self-destructive part of him had still been waiting for Charlie to wake up and change his mind.

But now Charlie grinned up at him, head on his shoulder, looking as hopelessly besotted as Harvey felt. Harvey leaned down to kiss him, because he *could,* he could do it anytime he wanted. He let himself get lost in it for a moment, forgetting all about the assembled guests. Until one of them tugged at his elbow.

"All right, doc, get off him for a second. It's toast time." Harvey pulled back, gazing into Charlie's eyes for a long moment before turning his attention to Maru. She rolled her eyes at him, though she was smiling. "I can't decide if you two are obnoxious or adorable."

“It’s our wedding day,” Charlie protested, leaning around Harvey to scowl at her. “Don’t we get a pass for that?”

“Just this once, I suppose,” she intoned mock-seriously, and winked at him as she stood and picked up her champagne flute. The *ting ting* of her knife against the glass brought the chattering crowd to attention, and everyone turned to face her expectantly; two tables away, Harvey saw her parents leaning together, smiling. Maru cleared her throat, looking down at Harvey, and her voice rang out across the square.

“I first met Harvey when I was nineteen years old,” she began, the corner of her mouth twitching up. “I realize I don’t need to tell any of you this, because you were there, but hey, it’s tradition to reminisce a little. I spent a lot of time hanging around the clinic in those days; I was just so excited to find another nerd to talk to.” There was a bubble of laughter from the crowd, especially Charlie. “Anyone else might have been annoyed, having a teenager lurking around all the time, asking questions. But Harvey never treated me like an annoyance, or even like a child. He showed me respect, and more importantly, friendship.

“None of this will come as a surprise to any of you. Everyone here tonight knows Harvey’s kind heart, his patience, and his empathy. But I think maybe not everyone knows the rest: his humor, his dedication, and his courage. I saw all of those things in him early on, and I always hoped someone else would, too. Someone who would appreciate how funny he can be, how devoted of a friend. And if they could also be cute and into sci-fi, that would be great.

“So one day last year, Charlie came into the clinic. And when Harvey walked out from the back and saw him, I took one look at his face and started trying to figure out what I would wear to their wedding. I could see how Harvey felt right away, and I knew Charlie would get there, too. Because I really don’t think it’s possible to get to know Harvey and not love him.”

Yoba, when had he started crying again? He hadn’t even realized until Charlie, looking teary himself, had offered him a napkin to dry his eyes on. Maru raised her glass, and all the villagers followed suit; Harvey lifted his own, and saw Charlie do the same from the corner of his eye.

“Harvey, my dear friend, I’m so happy for you. Here’s to many, many more years of you coming to work in an annoyingly good mood.” She had barely finished clinking her glass against his when he and Charlie both stood, squishing her into a fierce group hug; she let out a squawk of indignation, but put her arms around them and laughed. Charlie eventually released her and sat back down, but Harvey kept clinging to her, feeling unaccountably weepy. It had to be the champagne. Even if he’d only had one glass.

“I love you,” he whispered against her temple, dropping a kiss there. “Thank you.”

“Anytime, doc.” With one final squeeze, they released each other and found their seats again. Robin was crying too, dabbing at her eyes with her napkin as Demetrius beamed at them. As Harvey pulled his chair back in, he reached over and took Charlie’s hand with a watery smile.

“I haven’t been to a wedding in a while. What happens next? Cake?”

“God, I hope not,” Charlie groaned. “I still haven’t recovered from dinner.”

“Um,” came Shane’s voice from Charlie’s other side, “not cake, not yet.” They both turned to look at him, and to Harvey’s astonishment, Shane got slowly to his feet. His chair scraped back loudly, and Charlie stared as he picked up his flute of sparkling juice. Unlike when Maru had begun speaking, there was no need for him to call the guests to attention; the square was dead silent, everyone shocked to see Shane evidently preparing to *talk.*

“I told Charlie I wasn’t going to make a speech,” Shane said, and though he hadn’t raised his voice, it carried across the silence. “It’s not really my... *thing,* but the more I thought about it, I figured I had to do it. Charlie asked me to be his best man, and he never asks me to do anything.” Shane tilted his head, apparently thinking this over. “Well, except helping him with his chickens. And planting, sometimes. And installing farm equipment, and, okay actually, he asks me for stuff all the time. Never mind.

“But the thing is, he could ask me to come over and take care of chickens every day, and it wouldn’t even come close to what he’s done for me. I don’t...I’m not gonna get into all that, but he knows what I mean. He has carried me in more ways than one, and has apparently decided to pretend that all my worst qualities are funny or charming instead of just rude.

“The day we met, I told Charlie I didn’t do ‘friends.’ And I know he’s tried his best to convert me, but I’m sticking with that. Charlie is not my friend.” A line of confusion appeared between Charlie’s eyebrows, and Shane’s gaze flickered down to him for a moment. “He’s my brother. I mean, not literally, nobody in my family has hair like *that,* thank Yoba—but yeah. In all the ways that matter. And I guess, since you guys are married now, that makes Harvey my brother too. I know he makes Charlie happy. And...that makes me, um...well. That’s good.

“So I know you just raised your glasses, but let’s do it again. To Charlie and Harvey. Uh...nope, that’s it, I didn’t think this far ahead. Just...here.” Shane reached out with his glass and tapped it against Charlie’s before downing the entire contents; force of habit, Harvey supposed, since there was no alcohol in it. The crowd echoed his toast and raised their glasses again while Charlie stared at him, looking poleaxed; after a long moment of this, Shane turned to him, looking nervous.

“Was that...okay?”

“Shane,” Charlie choked out, and flung his arms around his friend. Shane returned the hug gingerly, patting Charlie’s back as though he might catch the hideous disease of feelings from touching him. He caught Harvey’s eye over Charlie’s shoulder with an expression of helplessness, and after what Harvey felt was a respectable interval, he reached out to gently disentangle his tearful husband.

“Let him sit down, honey,” he whispered, getting him settled in his seat. Charlie wiped at both of his eyes, apparently still totally overcome, and clutched hard at Shane’s forearm.

“Shane, I—that—gah,” he managed, and Shane looked to Harvey again.

“Yoba almighty,” he said, sounding stunned. “I broke your husband.”

“It’s been a long time since I saw him speechless,” Harvey agreed, chuckling.

“Shut *up,* both of you,” Charlie hissed through his tears, though he was smiling. “It’s an emotional day, okay? I didn’t make fun of you when you cried all over Maru, V.”

“I assumed you were saving it for later,” Maru piped up from Harvey’s other side.

“You’re right,” Harvey conceded, kissing him gently on the forehead. “I’m a terrible husband.”

“You’re *my* terrible husband, though.”

“That I am.”

* * * * *

Shane was glad, for a lot of reasons. He was glad his friends were happy. He was glad his speech was over, and that Charlie had seemed to like it, in spite of how badly he’d botched it. He was glad there had been such an insane amount of food, and that the evening was pleasantly warm and comfortable—perfect weather, really.

He was less glad that everyone around him was enjoying champagne while he clutched a flute of sparkling juice, lukewarm from how long he’d been holding it. He was even less glad that they’d now progressed to the dancing portion of the evening, which felt like it was going on *forever.* It wasn’t that he begrudged Charlie and Harvey their party. From his position, leaning against a lamppost, he could see the two of them dancing with Jas—each of them holding one of her hands and one of each other’s—and their expressions were so joyful and carefree. It was...nice.

It was also getting boring. Could he leave? He was the best man, so no, right?

The fast song ended, and transitioned into something slower and more romantic, an old Al Green number. Shane sighed, staring down into what was left of his stupid drink, wishing desperately that he could exchange it for something stronger.

“Does leave something to be desired, doesn’t it,” came a voice to his left, and he looked up to find Maru squinting into her own glass. His mouth opened a little in surprise.

“What, you’re not drinking either? Why?”

Maru looked at him as though he were stupid, gesturing to the glass in his hand. “I wasn’t going to let you be the *only* person here not drinking,” she said. “What kind of friend would that make me?”

Huh. Shane hadn’t realized they *were* friends. Sure, they’d danced together at the Flower Dance, and had some conversations during the process of planning the wedding, and she was friendly enough whenever they bumped into each other in town. And she had walked him home from the clinic that...that one time. But hadn’t Shane literally just reminded everyone that he didn’t have friends? Honestly, you let one tiny man into your life and he just leaves the door wide open for everyone else.

“Um,” he said awkwardly, unsure how to respond to this, “thanks. You didn’t have to.”

“I know,” she agreed, and took the glass from his hands before setting them both down beside the lamppost. “You can make it up to me. Come dance.” She held out a hand, and Shane stared at it as though it might bite him.

“Why?”

“Because we’re at a wedding, man, and it’s extremely boring to stand around watching *other* people dance,” she explained patiently. “And anyway, we’re the best man and best woman, right? It’s tradition. I think.”

Shane regarded her for a moment, unsure. He really didn’t dance, ever. The Flower Dance was a yearly nightmare gauntlet he endured for the sake of his aunt and Jas. But...he *was* bored out of his mind, and she had a point about tradition, maybe? And, okay, she did look kind of...slightly...incredible. Honestly, he dug the nurse’s uniform and glasses she wore most days, but she was also beautiful this way: her hair twisted up at the nape of her neck, smooth brown skin gleaming with some kind of highlighter. (Yes, *okay,* he lived with two girls, he knew what highlighter was.) She looked elegant, grown-up, and way out of his league.

And she wanted to dance with *him.* What the fuck was he doing?

“Okay,” he agreed at last, and followed her out to the dance floor.

Fortunately, Maru didn’t seem to expect much from him in the way of actual dance skills. She slung her arms loosely around his neck, and after a moment of awkward consideration, he placed his stiffly on her sides. She laughed, throwing her head back, and released him long enough to grab his hands and slide them down to her waist.

“You don’t have to leave room for Yoba,” she teased, returning her arms to his neck, a little closer this time. “We’re not in middle school.”

“Right,” Shane said, swallowing. Over her shoulder, he saw her father, dancing with Robin but watching the two of them with narrowed eyes. “Seems like your dad might not be too thrilled, though.”

“Oh, that’s just a bonus.” She winked at him, and he laughed in spite of his nerves. They were settling in a little now, bodies moving more naturally together, and he had to admit it felt...nice. Maybe more than nice. It had been well over a year, closer to two, since he’d touched anyone beyond a quick hug (Charlie) or a piggy-back ride (Jas). He wasn’t being a perv, he *wasn’t,* it just felt good to...hold someone. It was a nice reminder that he wasn’t just a depression-addled brain in a jar.

“So,” she asked, in a conspiratorial tone, “is your outfit as uncomfortable as mine?”

“Holy shit, dude. This is the most layers I’ve ever worn in my life. I can’t bend my arms.”

“I had no idea heels were this awful to walk in. I’ve only worn them, like, twice.”

“Oh, the sacrifices. We’re amazing friends, aren’t we?”

“The best.”

“Promise you’ll tell me when you finish your army of robots, so I can get the fuck out of town?” Shane asked, many threads of conversation later. He and Maru were still dancing, or something close to it, hanging onto each other and revolving slowly under the string lights. She’d abandoned her terrible shoes ages ago, and stood on Shane’s feet to stay off the cobblestones. Honestly, his toes were kinda falling asleep, but he wasn’t going to make her move.

“Promise,” she agreed, eyes twinkling. Something seemed to occur to her, and she tilted her head back to look more closely at him. “What about you? If you weren’t doing the Joja thing and helping Marnie, is there something else you’d want to do?”

It was a sign of how well the evening was going that Shane almost *answered* her, almost let it slip out without filtering himself. At the last moment, he remembered that dreams were stupid and telling other people about them was even stupider. “Eh, I haven’t really thought about it,” he replied, and she punched his arm lightly.

“Liar. You were about to say something. What is it?” He looked away, watching the others still on the floor. Suddenly it seemed very empty; when had that happened? Charlie and Harvey danced nearby, Charlie’s head on Harvey’s shoulder. A little distance away, Elliott twirled Leah, completely out of time with the song. Sebastian sat in a little cluster with Sam and Abigail, smoking in the DJ booth, and Emily danced blissfully by herself. “Hey,” Maru prodded, more gently, and he met her eyes. “Seriously, you can tell me. I’m not gonna judge you.”

And for once, Shane actually *wanted* to talk to someone about these things. He didn’t know why; he couldn’t even blame it on alcohol, only on the soft press of Maru’s body against his, the way the lights shone on her hair. It didn’t feel like real life, more like a dream, everything familiar but slightly altered. Maybe that was why it felt safe.

“Before I, um, messed up,” he began, haltingly, “I was going to school in Zuzu to become a vet.” She smiled at this, but he could tell it was a nice smile, she wasn’t mocking him. “I...really like animals, you know? But school was really hard, and I was working full-time on top of it, and I was just so tired. Like, all the time. Somebody in my class kept offering me something that would help, and eventually I…”

He trailed off here, burning with shame. They’d been having such a nice time, keeping things light, and then he’d done his usual downer thing. What did he think he was *doing,* dancing with this sweet, beautiful girl and spilling all his dumb fuck-ups to her? She didn’t need to hear this, she’d been polite and he—

“You made a mistake,” she finished softly, still looking into his eyes, “because you were tired and vulnerable, and then you came home, and you pulled yourself back together.”

“I made a mistake, and got caught, and then I almost went to *prison,* and *then* I came to live with Aunt Marnie because home didn’t want me around anymore,” he corrected her, because fuck it, she deserved to know it all if she was going to stand there and look at him like that.

“And I was a fucking disaster until Charlie…well.” He looked down at their feet, her dainty pedicured ones standing on his stiff, shiny shoes. “Actually, I’m still kind of a disaster.”

“Most people are,” Maru said, “but don’t sell yourself short. How many times have you wanted a drink tonight?” Shane blinked at her, considering.

“Only once,” he said, honestly, “but for, you know, eight solid hours.”

“And how many drinks have you had?” Shane didn’t answer. It was easy enough for her to pat him on the back and tell him he’d done a good job. It was so, so much harder for Shane to believe it, not when every moment felt like another opportunity for him to fuck it up. “Have you ever considered the possibility, Shane, that you are actually not a disaster at all? That you are strong, and brave, and really a pretty good guy?”

Shane had not considered it. It felt ludicrous to him. The fact of his inadequacy had always seemed like an obvious and immutable trait, like his height or the color of his eyes. But Maru did not look as though she pitied him, or was patronizing him. Her expression was calm and unwavering, as though she believed everything she said.

Huh.

“Um,” he said, and was horrified to find his voice tight, “listen, I—thank you, and I’ll—think about it, okay, but I don’t think I can, um, talk about this right now.”

“No problem.” Maru looked around the dance floor as the current song drew to a close, seeming to notice the dwindling numbers for the first time. “Place is clearing out, huh?”

“Yeah,” Shane replied, relieved to hear his voice sounding more normal. “Think we should call it a night?”

“Mm.” Maru turned back to him with an assessing look, and he couldn’t explain why, but he suddenly felt more nervous than he had all night. “Listen. I’m not actually tired, and I could use some company. We could call it a night...together.”

To his intense embarrassment, Shane felt his face go up in flames. “Um, as in…?”

“As in.”

Yes. Of course. No, definitely not. Um. What? Shane was short-circuiting. “I’m, uh, that’s really, wow, but I...why? Why do you, uh…”

“Because I like you, and you look pretty hot in that suit, and we’ve been pressed up against each other for the last hour and it sounds good,” she said simply. Shane’s brain didn’t know which statement to go bounding after first, *I like you* or *you look pretty hot.* “Don’t look so panicked, man, it’s not a marriage proposal. Just a friends with benefits thing. But if you don’t want to—”

“Yes,” Shane interrupted her, feeling impossibly redder than he’d been before. “Okay. Yeah. I, um...yes.” A thought occurred to him belatedly, and he nearly smacked his own forehead. “Ah, shit. I live with Aunt Marnie and Jas, you know, it’s not the best for…”

Maru laughed, her eyes glancing across the square as she stepped away and took his hand. “Well, Harvey told me I could use his old apartment if I ever needed a night away from my parents, and I can *guarantee* he won’t be there tonight.” They looked over at Charlie and Harvey, who had given up all pretense of dancing and were making out lazily against a lamppost. “So…”

“Are you sure he meant you could use it for... *this?”*

“If not,” Maru said, grinning wickedly, “then he is a foolish man who should learn to be more precise with his language.”

“True,” Shane said solemnly, and went to retrieve Maru’s purse from the table.

* * * * *

“I’m taller than you.”

“I’m stronger than you!”

“I’m older.”

“I proposed. Doesn’t that count for something?”

“We’re not going to play rock-paper-scissors again, are we?” Harvey asked, laughing, as they stood just outside the door to the farmhouse. It was late, *very* late, and instead of being indoors and in bed like good newlyweds, they were having a friendly argument about who should carry who over the threshold.

“I think we’d better just walk,” Charlie said, reaching for his hand. “Wouldn’t want anyone to throw their back out, not when we’ve got better things to do.” It also probably wasn’t a fantastic idea for either of them to be hoisting the other up in the air while tipsy, although they’d sobered up a fair bit on the long walk home. They’d been nearly the last ones left in the square, save for Sebastian’s little gang smoking on a bench. Charlie idly wondered if Harvey had seen Maru and Shane scurrying into the clinic together.

He decided it probably wasn’t the right time to bring it up to him.

Finally, they stood in the kitchen, still hand-in-hand. Charlie felt an odd thrill of nervousness, something he hadn’t felt since their first time together. It was silly, he knew; they’d had sex dozens if not hundreds of times, they knew every inch of each other’s bodies, but this was their first time as *husbands.* He wanted it to be memorable. Realizing he’d been silent and still for too long, he looked up at Harvey, and one glance at his face told him Harvey was feeling exactly the same thing. They burst into a fit of nervous giggles, leaning on each other.

“Oh, Yoba,” Harvey sighed, rubbing his face with his free hand. “Why am I nervous?”

“Literally no reason to be,” Charlie agreed. “But...it’s our wedding night.”

“It is. You *married* me,” Harvey said, looking awestruck.

“I married you. You better watch yourself, or I’ll do it again.”

They made their way into the bedroom amidst another round of helpless giggles, still holding hands. With a whispered, “wait here,” Charlie stood Harvey at the end of the bed and went to retrieve his matches. He’d prepared for this earlier, piling every candle they owned into the bedroom, and now he flitted around the room lighting them. (It took a little longer than it should have; alcohol and matches were a bad combination, it seemed.) When he’d gotten the last one lit, he turned to Harvey, and was rendered speechless for the second time that night.

Harvey stood between the bed and the window, watching Charlie move around the room. One side of his face was lit by the moon and stars shining through the window, lining it in silver; the other glowed softly golden from the candles. He held his hands in front of him, absently toying with his new wedding ring, the long lines of his body accentuated by his suit.

“God, you’re beautiful,” Charlie breathed, and closed the distance between them in three strides. They kissed urgently, hands coming up to comb through hair or cup each other’s faces, all the day’s emotions bubbling up between them. Harvey seized Charlie by the hips and pulled them together, and Charlie broke away with a gasp; Harvey’s lips found his ear.

“As much as I love seeing you in this suit,” he whispered, “I think it’s outstayed its welcome, don’t you?”

“Oh, I *do,”* Charlie agreed breathlessly, pulling back to give Harvey room. They undressed each other slowly and reverently, letting each piece of their wedding finery fall to the floor. Charlie ran his hands up Harvey’s chest; Harvey kissed along the line of Charlie’s shoulder. With every inch of Harvey’s skin he revealed, Charlie thought *mine, all mine, forever.*

Somehow or another, they ended up in bed. Charlie lay on his back, bracketed by Harvey’s arms. Harvey gazed down into his face, stroking his hair, and smiled at him. It was a little bit lopsided, and Charlie realized that Harvey was possibly drunker than he was.

“Charlie,” he murmured, ducking down to nuzzle at Charlie’s face, “my Charlie.”

“Yours,” Charlie agreed, and let out a gasp as Harvey sucked a mark into his throat.

“Still can’t believe it,” Harvey said against his skin, drifting downward. “You’re so...so perfect. So beautiful, so good...so good to me…”

Scratch *possibly* drunker, make that *definitely.* Harvey wasn’t wasted by any means, but Charlie knew him; he only spoke his mind this freely when he was at least a little buzzed. Normally, he stammered out his compliments while blushing, which was adorable in its own right. But when he let it all out like this, Charlie felt as though he would melt from the praise. Harvey’s lips left a burning trail down Charlie’s neck, across the expanse of his collarbone, down to one of his nipples; Charlie’s breath left him as Harvey sucked it, tongue flickering.

“Jesus, Harvey!”

When Harvey apparently felt he’d been thorough enough, he released that one and headed for the other, lips dragging across Charlie’s chest. “I love you,” he murmured between them, “so

much," and then he'd reached his destination and Charlie was cursing again. His hands flew to the back of Harvey's head, anchoring himself.

"Gah," he gasped, helpless under Harvey's ministrations, "I love you too, baby— *ah!"* Harvey had nipped at him, very gently, before laving his tongue over the spot to soothe it. When he released Charlie at last, he resumed his journey south, kissing down the plane of his stomach and toward Charlie's aching erection.

"I'm so lucky," Harvey breathed across his skin, and Charlie huffed a laugh, because seriously? Harvey had his mouth two inches from Charlie's dick, and *he* was the lucky one? "Can't believe I get to do this," at which he trailed off and pressed a kiss to the base of Charlie's cock, which twitched in anticipation, "any time I want."

"Any time, darlin', you just say the word."

Harvey made a noise of deep appreciation, like a man being presented with a delicious dessert, and then teased at the head of Charlie's cock with his tongue. Charlie pressed his head back against the pillows, his mouth falling open. Oh, it was good, so good, those lips sliding around him, taking him further and further and—

"Fuck, *fuck,"* Charlie moaned, as he felt Harvey's throat tight around him. "Oh, my God. What are you doing to me?" In response, Harvey hummed thoughtfully—fuck, he could *feel* it—and trailed a hand up the inside of his thigh. A moment later, Charlie felt a slick finger probing gently at his entrance. He hadn't even noticed Harvey opening the lube; how his tipsy husband was more in control than he was, he had no idea. "Do it, please, *yes,"* he hissed, as Harvey's finger slid inside him.

This continued for an amount of time Charlie couldn't track, Harvey's mouth and fingers moving in tandem. Focused on the wet heat surrounding his dick, Charlie barely noticed when Harvey added another finger, then a third. By the time he worked a fourth in, Charlie was nearly sobbing, hands clenched in the pillow on either side of his head. He didn't know what he wanted; he was desperate to come, but equally desperate to be fucked and filled. "Harvey," he cried, hoping his husband would somehow understand and make the decision for him.

As always, Harvey understood him. He pulled back slowly, releasing Charlie's dick with a wet *pop,* and kept his fingers buried inside. "Do you want me," he asked, his voice beautifully hoarse, "in here?" He crooked his fingers, and Charlie's back arched off the bed.

"Yes, *yes,"* he begged, relieved. Before he'd had time to properly mourn the loss of that sweet mouth, Harvey pulled his fingers free, shifted up Charlie's body, and buried himself to the hilt inside him. Charlie felt his legs wrap around Harvey's waist, almost of their own volition, and then Harvey was moving. He kept his thrusts slow and smooth, rolling above Charlie like waves coming into shore, and Charlie felt almost delirious with pleasure.

"Look at you," Harvey whispered, gazing down into his face with a rapt expression, "look how beautiful you are, and all mine…"

"Ah, *Harvey,* God—"

No matter how Charlie spurred him on, heels digging into Harvey's hipbones, he kept up that slow, maddening rhythm. He made love to Charlie as though he were precious, a treasure beyond belief. "Can't get enough of you," Harvey murmured against his neck, kissing Charlie's flushed skin and sending shivers all through his body. "Not ever, I— *ah* —Yoba, Charlie—"

"That's it," Charlie breathed, mouth against Harvey's ear. "I love you, I've got you." He clung to Harvey's shoulders, holding on for dear life as he picked up the pace, the smooth thrusts of his hips gradually turning into hard snaps. Charlie desperately wanted to get a hand on his cock, he was dying for more friction, but that would have meant releasing Harvey's shoulders and he couldn't bring himself to do it. A shudder ran through Harvey's body, one Charlie recognized, and he realized his own orgasm would have to wait. "Come on, baby, give it to me, come for me—"

Harvey did, making a long, broken sound with his face buried in Charlie's neck. Charlie felt the hot flood deep inside him, filling him up. A deep, primal possessiveness came over him, a fierce joy at having a part of Harvey left inside him. He wound all his limbs even tighter around Harvey, pulling his bony form close and pressing kisses into his sweat-damp hair. At last, Harvey lifted his head, looking a little shamefaced.

"I'm sorry," he said. "I didn't mean to—I was going to hold on until you were done, but it was just *so good,* and—"

"Darlin', I am the furthest possible thing from disappointed," Charlie assured him, smiling. "You were perfect. I loved it."

"Let me make it up to you," Harvey whispered. Before Charlie could ask what he meant, he shifted, sliding his lube-covered fingers between his own legs. Charlie watched, mouth hanging open, as Harvey began determinedly working fingers into himself.

"You don't—I mean, I *want* to, but—isn't that going to be too much for you? Right after?" Charlie asked weakly, while his erection shouted at him *shut up!* "I don't want to hurt you."

"You're not going to hurt me." Harvey was up on his knees now, fucking two fingers into himself, and smiling breathlessly. "You're going to make me feel *so* good."

Charlie watched him hungrily, giving his own dick a few slow strokes. Harvey was pliable from his orgasm, and it took very little time before he'd worked in three fingers, face twisting in pleasure. Finding the discarded bottle of lube in the sheets, Charlie slicked himself, and Harvey crawled forward until he straddled Charlie's hips.

"Oh, Charlie," he sighed, as he sank down around Charlie's cock, "I love you." Instantly, Charlie knew it wasn't going to take long; he was too overstimulated as it was, and the sight of Harvey grinding down into his lap was gorgeous beyond belief. To his amazement, Harvey's erection had started to return—not to full attention yet, but there was definite interest there. Charlie let out a shocked laugh, running his hands up Harvey's long thighs.

"Aren't you supposed to be almost forty?" he asked, snapping his hips up. "How are you getting hard again already?"

Harvey grinned, letting his head loll back on his shoulders. “It’s you,” he breathed, “just you, I want you so much.”

Charlie really hadn’t needed any extra stimulation. He was too close to the edge already, but hearing Harvey’s declaration had pushed him past the point of no return. “Jesus, Harvey, *fuck,* I’m coming,” he groaned, and did. He pushed down on Harvey’s hips, filling him, sweet relief rushing through his veins. When he managed to open his eyes, still twitching inside Harvey, he was treated to the sight of his husband working a fist over his own cock. He reached out, wrapping his own hand over Harvey’s as he stroked, and Harvey gasped.

“Charlie!”

“I want you to come all over me,” Charlie ordered him, “mark me up, let everybody know I’m your husband, I’m yours—”

“Oh my *God,”* Harvey ground out, and Charlie grinned wickedly; he always counted it as a success when he could make Harvey forget the village’s *own religion.* “Fuck, Charlie, *Charlie!”* Almost screaming Charlie’s name, he came for the second time, spurting hotly across Charlie’s chest.

They were mostly silent as they cleaned each other up, only murmured endearments punctuating the quiet. When they’d washed their hands, extinguished the candles, and rehydrated a little, they fell into bed together. Harvey wrapped Charlie in his arms, a hand circling on his back; Charlie stroked along Harvey’s jaw, occasionally reaching up to press kisses there.

“Harvey?” he whispered, when he thought his husband might have fallen asleep. Harvey cracked one eye, gazing at him blearily.

“Hm?”

“This is the happiest I’ve ever been.”

Harvey’s eye slid shut again, and his mouth curved in a sleepy smile. “Me, too,” he murmured, wrapping Charlie up even tighter. Charlie felt drowsy, and safe, and so, so loved. “And we’re just getting started.”

Chapter End Notes

Husbands! I hope you enjoyed the wedding. It took me forever to write this chapter--I wanted it to be a pretty, romantic wedding while still being fun to read. Maru and Shane weren't something I had planned from the beginning, but whenever I wrote scenes with them both present, I could see some potential chemistry there :)

As you can see, we still have 17 chapters left! The story is going to start to change its focus a little bit going forward. Don't worry, it's still going to be 100% about Charlie and

Harvey, and be disgustingly fluffy and romantic, etc. But it's also going to start earning that "action/adventure" tag I gave it in the beginning. I hope you're up for some daring and danger!

Tomorrow: a honeymoon, a renovation, and some new additions. Charlie makes some very strange new friends. The Dance of Moonlight Jellies arrives again, and this time, they don't miss it.

Chapter 22: Summer, Year 2

Chapter Summary

A honeymoon, a renovation, and some new additions. Charlie makes some very strange new friends. The Dance of Moonlight Jellies arrives again, and this time, they don't miss it.

Chapter Notes

No content warnings for this chapter! Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The honeymoon went by in a sun-dappled, ocean-scented blur. Every morning, Harvey woke up early, starting the coffee and then coming back to bed to watch Charlie sleep. The bungalow they'd rented in the Fern Islands was tiny—neither of them were made of money, although (to his secret shame) Harvey's finances had improved a lot since marrying Charlie—but it was beautiful, perched right on the edge of a secluded beach. With Shane staying on the farm and Maru running the clinic, there were no obligations tugging at them, no cows to milk or crops to harvest or patients to see. Instead, they spent their time soaking up sun, waves, each other's company, and a great many fruity umbrella drinks. They tried surfing for five minutes before giving up and just floating around on their boards. They went dancing at a club in town. They had an almost unfathomable amount of sex, including one aborted try on the beach that resulted in a lot of sand in uncomfortable places. They lay on a beach blanket at night, staring up at the stars and marveling at how lucky they were.

And: they missed home.

"I wonder how Bones is doing," Charlie whispered one night, his head on Harvey's chest. "And Pizza and the girls."

This came as a relief to Harvey. He thought they were probably supposed to wish their vacation would never end, and he was certainly enjoying himself. But it was the first time he'd spent more than 48 hours away from Pelican Town since moving there, and a week into their honeymoon, he was feeling more homesick than he'd anticipated. He pulled Charlie closer, kissed the top of his head, breathed in the scent that had become more of a home to him than any village.

"We'll find out tomorrow," he murmured, letting his eyes drift shut.

“I still can’t believe *I* got sunburned and *you* didn’t,” Charlie griped as they bounced along in the bed of Marnie’s pickup truck. Shane had fetched them from the dock with their bags, but the cab was too small to comfortably fit three adult men. “I’m outside all day, *every day.* You’re like a vampire. How did this happen?”

“Hubris, my dear,” Harvey said, preening a little. “You forgot the sun could hurt you. I’ve never forgotten for a *moment.”* He glanced sideways at Charlie, who was pouting behind his sunglasses, and tried not to laugh at how red he was. Combined with the auburn hair, he looked as though someone had set him on fire.

The truck bumped to a stop at the eastern entrance to the farm, and Shane stuck his head out the window. “Alright,” he called, “as much as I’d love to stick around and make fun of Charlie, I gotta get to work. Out.” Charlie huffed even harder, but climbed down, extending a hand to help Harvey. They collected their bags, thanked Shane, and started down the path as he turned the truck around. Harvey was just as excited to be heading home as he’d been to head out on their honeymoon; as the house came into view between the trees, he felt a surge of happiness, but—wait, what?

“Charlie,” he said slowly, “what happened to our house?” Because it very clearly wasn’t the same house they’d left behind. On the side nearest to them, a new addition jutted out, the porch extending to wrap around it. He squinted at the addition’s windows, but couldn’t make anything out against the bright noon sun.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about,” Charlie replied airily. “It looks the same to me.”

“Charlie…”

“Better go inside and find out, I guess!”

Charlie sounded so pleased with himself, Harvey nearly broke into a run. He jogged up the steps, abandoning his suitcase on the porch, and flung open the door. Bones immediately pounced on him, barking madly, and Harvey took a moment just to greet their sweet dog; when he’d doled out enough ear scratches and belly rubs not to be rude, he went in the house and headed straight for the bedroom.

He didn’t understand.

A new, smaller room had been built off the side of their bedroom, wallpapered in green but mostly bare. It had windows on the north and east walls, and a large set of empty shelves on the south one. A large desk nestled beneath one window, and a sturdy square table beneath another; in front of each was a comfortable-looking chair. Why would Charlie have needed to build an office? And why wouldn’t he have told Harvey about it? He was missing something here, but he couldn’t quite fit the final puzzle piece in place.

He revolved slowly in the middle of the room, looking around; Charlie stepped into his space, grinning like the Cheshire cat, and wrapped his arms around his waist. Bones trailed

after him like a duckling, leaning against the backs of his legs. "Well, look at that," Charlie said, giving Harvey a squeeze. "It grew another room."

"Charlie, what…?"

"Seems awfully empty, though," Charlie clucked. "If only we had some stuff to fill it up. Like maybe some radio equipment and model planes, hmm?"

The piece clicked into place, and Harvey's mouth dropped open. "You...built me a room?" he asked, looking around at it. Now that he had all the information, it made perfect sense: the desk was just the right size for his radio setup, and he'd be able to see planes on their flight path out the northern window; the table would be just right for building his models, and the shelves for displaying them. "Charlie. I...I don't know what to say."

He shouldn't have been surprised, not really. Charlie loved a grand gesture; he'd been making them their entire relationship. But even though he felt secure in Charlie's life, even though he'd thought of the farmhouse as home for months now, half his things had stayed behind in the clinic. He hadn't missed them much—he didn't *need* to spend time reaching out into the void for company, not the way he used to—but this: it felt like Charlie was truly bringing him home, offering to untie the last tether to his old, lonely life.

"Do you like it?" Charlie asked, beaming at him, and Harvey huffed a laugh.

"Honey, it's...amazing. You're amazing. You're sure you want all my dorky hobbies in here, though?"

Charlie's eyes softened, and he stroked a hand up Harvey's spine. "I love every part of you," he murmured, leaning in closer. *"Especially* the dorky ones. And I want all of you here, with me. If that's okay."

"What did I do to deserve you," he breathed, and kissed Charlie before he could answer. He didn't need a response, didn't need anything more than Charlie had already given him. All he needed was this: their sweet little house, with their dog tangled in their legs and their chickens pecking around outside. Their cozy bedroom, their orderly rows of crops, their fields of wildflowers Charlie hadn't had the heart to plow yet. And their arms around each other, their love for one another, filling him up until there was no room for even Harvey to doubt.

Harvey's room wasn't the only new addition Charlie had commissioned from Robin during their absence. Two days after their return, Harvey took his coffee outside to find her marking out a space in the field to the south. This turned out to be the foundation for a barn, Charlie's most ambitious upgrade yet. Harvey was honestly a little nervous about the prospect of having large animals around—Charlie was talking about cows, sheep, *pigs!*— but Charlie's enthusiasm was infectious. He'd checked out an enormous tome about the care and keeping of farm animals from the library, and read it every chance he got.

“Did you know,” he asked one night over dinner, the book lying open beside his plate, “that a sheep that falls onto its back usually can’t get back up again without help?” He looked up at Harvey, an expression of almost comical horror on his face. “That’s terrible! I’m going to have to keep an eye on them all the time!”

“I don’t think it’s very common for them to fall that way, honey,” Harvey said gently, biting back a laugh. “Being that they’re pretty low to the ground, and they have four legs. It’ll be okay.”

They’d discussed the prospect of adding more animals to the farm, back before the wedding. Getting married and moving (really, totally, a hundred percent) onto the farm had changed the dynamic a little. Was it now *their* farm? Technically they both owned it, Harvey supposed, but he had no desire to tell Charlie what to do with it. His reasoning was that Charlie had built it alone, and worked it mostly alone, beyond a little help from Harvey whenever he could spare the time. Charlie had agreed to remaining the decision-maker about farm matters, but had made it clear he welcomed Harvey’s input whenever he felt like giving it.

Sometimes, Harvey had the silly wish that he could spend more time helping Charlie. He didn’t mind his work at the clinic, but he *did* mind leaving every morning and sometimes not seeing Charlie again until dinnertime. He knew it was normal—most married couples operated on this kind of schedule—but he was clingy, and he wanted more time with his husband. But he was both the best-qualified doctor in town and probably the least-qualified farmer, so he kept this to himself. No need to let on to Charlie just *how* clingy he really was, anyway.

The barn was finished on a Wednesday in mid-summer, and the following day, Harvey came home to find a note on the door in Charlie’s hasty scrawl. *In the barn!!!!! Come see!!!!!* it said, and how could Harvey refuse that many exclamation points? He put his things down inside and headed into the brand-new barn, and before his eyes had adjusted to the dim lighting, a short and extremely overexcited figure hurtled toward him at top speed.

“They’re here! Baby! They’re here!” Charlie shrieked, seizing him around the middle; Harvey caught him, laughing, and looked over his head. In the corner, clustered together and blinking uncertainly at the world around them, were a handful of animals: two calves, a lamb, and a baby goat. In the amount of time it took to take all this in, Harvey’s heart melted into a puddle. *Oh, Yoba,* he thought, gazing into the brown calf’s sweet, shining eyes. *We’re in so much trouble.*

“They’re...they’re so *cute,”* Harvey managed, a little awestruck. Charlie beamed up at him, radiating excitement and joy.

“I know!”

“And they’re so *small.”*

“Yes!” Charlie stepped back, still clinging to Harvey’s shirt with one hand. “I know I said I’d be taking care of them myself, but I actually do have a really important job for you to do.”

“Okay,” Harvey said cautiously.

“They’re gonna need names,” Charlie went on, grinning, “and obviously I can’t be trusted to do it, so. Will you do the honors?”

And so: Belle and Goose the cows, Electra the goat, and Louie the sheep settled into their new home. (Harvey then spent an entire afternoon explaining their namesakes to Charlie: the *Memphis Belle* B-17, Howard Hughes’ *Spruce Goose,* Amelia Earhart’s Lockheed Electra, and the *Spirit of St. Louis. Yes,* it was dorky to name a barn full of animals after famous aircraft, but then one could argue it wasn’t especially cool to have a coop full of chickens named after 90s pop stars.) Harvey had struggled a little in trying to befriend the chickens; for one thing, Pizza seemed to view him as a threat, and rarely let him near the coop. Then there was the fact that you just never knew what a chicken was *thinking.* They were unpredictable, and Harvey’s anxiety couldn’t take it. Mammals, though: they were a different story. By their third day in the barn, Harvey had adjusted his morning routine fifteen minutes earlier, just so he could spend some time cooing over the babies before he left for work.

“Should I be jealous?” Charlie joked one afternoon, when Harvey had come home and gone straight to the barn to greet the animals. “Are you going to start sleeping in there?”

“Don’t be ridiculous,” he replied primly, scratching Goose behind a soft brown ear. “Obviously we’ll just build a bigger door so *they* can sleep with *us.”*

It was all unbearably idyllic, spending long summer evenings on a picnic blanket with Charlie, watching their babies graze and chase each other. He couldn’t remember a time in his life he’d felt so content, so comfortable with his place in the world. He lay beneath the darkening sky, fingers intertwined with his husband’s, and thought that if the rest of his life passed just like this, he’d consider it all a major success.

And then he came home, one day toward the end of summer, to find Charlie sitting at the kitchen table. His face was ashen, he was clammy and sweating, and his knuckles were white around a bottle of vodka—at three in the afternoon.

“Charlie! Honey, what’s wrong?”

Charlie looked at him, slowly, and Harvey felt a stab of fear go through his heart; he’d never seen that expression on his face before. “It’s been...a weird day,” he said hoarsely. Harvey dropped into the chair beside his and took his hand, gripping it tightly.

“What happened? Talk to me.”

Charlie relinquished his grip on the vodka and scrubbed that hand over his face, his hair sticking up wildly. “Which do you want to hear about first,” he asked, “the demon in the sewers or the fairies in the community center?”

* * * * *

Charlie’s road to hell had, as is so often the case, been paved with good intentions.

Vincent and Jas had been playing near the drain culvert south of Marnie’s ranch. It wasn’t the first time Charlie had found them there; it seemed that all kinds of fascinating things flowed

out of it, and the kids liked to search for treasures sometimes. Charlie himself had been foraging for spice berries, with a half-baked plan to blend them into a few kegs of wine and see what that tasted like. When he'd approached the ledge above the culvert, a pair of small, sweaty faces had popped up over it.

"Mr. Charlie!" Jas had cried. "Come help!"

The problem, it seemed, was that they'd spotted a gridball just out of arm's reach inside the culvert grate. Jas had identified it as belonging to Alex, and wanted to bring it back to him. (Vincent, who was usually an incredibly cheerful kid, seemed oddly sulky about Jas's interest in returning Alex's ball.) Fortunately, for reasons he still wasn't quite sure he understood, Charlie had a key to the grate. Gunther had bestowed it upon him with great ceremony during one of his donation drops at the museum, and Charlie had stood outside staring at it for a full ten minutes, thinking, *couldn't you just pay me, dude?*

Getting the ball had been no big deal, though it had been covered in gunk of various kinds, and Charlie's shoes were soaked through by the time he retrieved it. "I'm heading into town tomorrow to meet Harvey," he told the kids, gingerly holding the nasty ball at arm's length. "I can bring it back to Alex, if you wa—"

"No!" Jas blurted, and then blushed furiously. "I mean, no thank you, Mr. Charlie. I'll take it to him. Thank you for your help." She ran away without a backwards glance, arms wrapped tightly around the ball and Vincent jogging in her wake.

His duty discharged, Charlie stepped out of the culvert and swung the gate shut—but then, he heard a strange sound. It almost sounded like *humming,* but coming from deep in the sewer. What the fuck? For a long moment, Charlie hesitated with his hand on the key. He'd seen *It,* he knew how this went. Wandering into the sewer to investigate the source of a disembodied hum was too Lara Croft even for him. Nope, he wasn't going to do it. It could stay a creepy mystery, a ghost story to tell Vincent and Jas; he had a husband and a dog who would miss him if he got himself murdered. He turned the key and pocketed it, confident he'd made the right decision.

Forty-five seconds later, he'd unlocked the gate and made his way back down the tunnel. It turned out he *couldn't* live with the mystery. Given the choice between dying of curiosity or dying of psychotic clown, he'd evidently chosen the latter. The humming grew louder as he progressed, and he saw a greenish light at the end of the tunnel. *It's not as scary as the mines,* he told himself, glancing back over his shoulder at the dwindling speck of daylight. *Not as scary, just gross, right?*

"Hello?"

Charlie nearly jumped out of his skin, letting out a shout of alarm that echoed horribly down the tunnel. Whoever had called out to him, they had a low, gravelly, Tom Waits-y voice, almost as though they had grinding rocks in place of vocal cords. "Oh, sorry," it continued, sounding alarmingly close. "Didn't mean to startle you. I just haven't had a customer in a while."

...Customer?

“Um, hi,” Charlie squeaked, then cleared his throat and tried again. “Hello. I wasn’t really expecting…” As he cautiously stepped around the bend in the pipe, he trailed off. There was a shockingly large room down here, rivers of sewage flowing through it in every direction. A series of walkways crossed the room, greenish lamps glowed on the walls, and a ladder led up to...somewhere? But Charlie’s attention had been caught by the mystery speaker: a tall, pitch-black, indistinct figure with blank white eyes.

What.

What.

“What,” he choked out at last, feeling tremors shaking their way up from his feet.

The creature regarded him with those weird, glowing eyes for a long moment, then let out what was unmistakably a sigh. “‘What’ is kind of a rude question,” it said. “‘Who’ is much more polite, when you’ve just met someone.”

Now Charlie was getting a lecture on manners from the mystery sewer demon. Had he actually slipped in sewage and knocked himself unconscious? Was this the bizarre after-effect of going to bed after a big meal? “I’m sorry,” he said faintly. “I, um... *who* are you, then?”

“Krobus.” The creature didn’t extend a hand, for which Charlie was secretly very thankful; he wasn’t sure he could handle being asked to touch it. “This is my house.”

Charlie couldn’t decide on a response between *well, actually it’s a sewer* and *okay, but seriously what the fuck are you.* He landed on, “Charlie.”

Krobus, it turned out, was a Shadow Brute—a type of monster, apparently *(his word, not mine,* thought Charlie). Why did he live in the sewer? “Commerce,” he explained. “Humans live near here. I thought they might like to visit my shop.”

“Well, humans don’t really like going into the sewer, if they don’t have to,” Charlie said, as gently as he could. Krobus’s mouth turned up in something Charlie thought was possibly a smile, though it terrified him.

“Ah, but it’s about the *quality* of customer, not the *quantity,”* Krobus corrected him. “Speaking of which, want to take a look?”

Charlie kind of did, actually. He was still pretty shaken up, but when a sewer demon offered you the chance to shop their closet, you had to take it, right? Krobus led him a few feet away, to a blanket covered in junk with no discernible theme: a couple geodes, some monster parts, something that looked like a bent coat hanger (“art,” Krobus declared solemnly), a black egg with bright-red speckles. Charlie pointed at this, horrified.

“I think that egg’s gone bad, dude,” he said, and Krobus laughed. It sounded like a rusty portcullis being forced to open against its will; Charlie desperately hoped he didn’t say anything else inadvertently funny.

“That is a void egg. It will not go bad.”

“What made it?”

“A void chicken.”

Ask a stupid question, get a stupid answer, Charlie thought to himself. “Okay, but when you say *void,”* he pressed, as delicately as possible.

“You know. The void. The alternate realm parallel to our own, powered by suffering and despair.” Krobus delivered this speech nonchalantly, his tone almost bored. Charlie’s head was beginning to hurt.

“Right, *that* void. My mistake.” Charlie picked up the egg, turning it over in his hands; it was weirdly warm for having been lying on a blanket with no mother hen in sight. “Hypothetically speaking, could you *hatch* a, um...void chicken...from this?”

“I don’t see why not.”

And so, throwing his better judgment to the wind for the second time that day, Charlie carefully tucked the egg into his backpack (wrapped in a spare pair of socks and nestled into a side pocket) and handed over an unconscionable amount of money. He couldn’t even say *why* he wanted the Chicken of Despair. It was probably the same dumb, morbidly curious impulse that had propelled him into the sewer in the first place.

“Does it ever get lonely?” he asked Krobus, hitching his backpack onto his shoulders as he set his foot on the bottom rung of the ladder (which, he now knew, led up into the square). “Being the only, uh, supernatural creature around here?”

“I imagine it would, but I am not the only one,” Krobus replied, putting an adorably hand-lettered SOLD OUT sign in the egg’s space on the blanket. “The Junimo come to visit often, for one.”

Charlie considered himself a relatively patient man, but he had just about reached the end of his endurance for mysterious bullshit. “What the f— *what* is a Junimo, exactly?”

“Well,” he said an hour later, standing just inside the entrance of the old community center with wide, disbelieving eyes, “okay.”

He’d mistaken it for a slime at first glance. They were both green, about the size of a large grapefruit, and bouncy. But this thing had legs, and what kind of looked like a stem protruding from its head. And it was opaque. And, most notably, it hadn’t attacked him.

Yet.

Krobus had explained that the Junimo were small forest spirits that helped keep the Valley alive, and that he often saw them lurking around the old community center. Almost certain that he was in the grips of some kind of fever dream, Charlie had decided he might as well go

along with it, and headed off to see for himself. And there it was: a tennis ball with a face, heading into one of the back rooms and gesturing, unmistakably, for Charlie to follow it.

“Absolutely not,” he declared, shaking his head staunchly. “No fucking way. I’ve made enough incredibly stupid decisions today. I’m out.”

The thing turned, let its wavy little arms drop limply to its sides, and sat on the floor. It looked *depressed,* and Charlie instantly felt like a total asshole. He ground his teeth together, deliberating.

Husband and dog, the rational part of his brain reminded him. *They need you alive.*

The creature looked at the floor and made a tiny sniffling noise.

“Fuuuuuuuuck,” Charlie sighed, scrubbing his hands violently over his face. And then, just as he’d always known he would, he followed the thing to the back room.

“So,” Harvey said at last, a little hesitantly. “Um. The Junimo are…”

“I think they’re trying to fix the community center?” Charlie supplied woozily. The vodka wasn’t doing what he’d hoped—namely, numbing the shock of having his entire worldview turned upside down in six hours—but it *was* making it nearly impossible to organize his thoughts. “Or maybe they’re just hoarders. I don’t know. It kept squeaking at me, so I gave it a tomato. It got really excited and ran off with it. I think it put it in the pantry.”

“You gave it a tomato?” Harvey repeated blankly, and Charlie made a wild, incomprehensible gesture.

“I don’t know! It looked hungry, maybe!”

Harvey was silent for a long moment, and Charlie squinted at him, willing himself to sober up. He was finding it difficult to interpret meaningful pauses in this state. “Honey, can you hold on for just a moment?” Harvey asked at last, and Charlie nodded bleakly. Out of the swimming, wobbly corner of his eye, he saw Harvey disappear into the bedroom. He came back a moment later carrying something, and placed it on the table: his backup medical bag, the one he kept at home for emergencies.

“I just want to check a few things,” he said gently, rummaging through the bag, and Charlie’s stomach dropped.

“You don’t believe me?” he whispered. Somehow, he hadn’t prepared for this possibility. He’d thought there was a decent chance Harvey would be angry—he *had* willfully put himself in possible danger multiple times that day—but he hadn’t expected outright disbelief. It hurt more than he would have expected.

“I don’t *not* believe you, sweetheart, I just want to be sure nothing else is going on. Okay?” Harvey kissed the top of his head, lingering for a moment; he seemed just as rattled as Charlie, in his own way. Charlie supposed that was fair. When one’s husband came home

screeching about sewer demons and helpful forest spirits, a psychotic break wasn't a completely unfounded conclusion.

Jesus, maybe all this *was* just a brain tumor or something.

He went ahead and let Harvey do his tests; it was easier than arguing about it. Maybe he should have brought a camera, but in his defense, who expected to need a camera in the *sewers?* Who expected to be heading into the sewers in the first place? For once, Charlie was too distracted to be aroused by Harvey's face inches away and his hands up his shirt. Halfway through having his heart rate checked, something clicked into place in his brain. "Wait!" he barked, and Harvey toppled off his chair, wincing.

"Char, *stethoscope,"* he groaned, pulling it out of his ears. Charlie called a quick apology over his shoulder as he ran for his backpack, dropped beside the front door. A few moments later, he returned to the kitchen with his prize, and held it up triumphantly toward Harvey.

"What's wrong with that egg?" Harvey asked, reaching out to touch it gingerly. "Gah! Why is it *warm?"*

"Apparently it's going to summon a demon chicken or something," Charlie said, turning it over in his hand. "Krobus said it would hatch, anyway."

"You're going to *hatch* it?"

"Gonna try, at least." Harvey took the egg gently from his hand and placed it in the fruit bowl on the table, then steered Charlie back to his chair and knelt in front of him. He had the look on his face Charlie associated with delivering bad medical news.

"Honey," he began, taking Charlie's hands in his own, "listen. I believe you. I do."

"Really?"

"You're perfectly healthy—other than being a little drunk," he added, side-eyeing the bottle of vodka, "and I know you wouldn't lie to me. And anyway, I know there are things in this valley that are...different. I mean, did you ever hear of a slime before you moved here? And the mines are full of them."

"There are skeletons down there, too," Charlie said, swaying a little. Harvey's eyebrows disappeared into his hair, and Charlie instantly regretted having said it.

"What, like those ones Marlon brings to Spirits' Eve? *Real skeletons* that *walk around?"*

"Um. Yes?"

Harvey pushed his glasses up on top of his head and pinched the bridge of his nose; Charlie waited, feeling a little nauseous now that he'd stopped drinking. "And they're not friendly, I take it."

"Um. No."

Charlie watched his husband struggle with himself, obviously deciding whether to continue their earlier disturbing thread of conversation or follow this new one. Finally, Harvey let out a long exhale. “We’re going to have a long talk about these mine expeditions later,” he sighed.

“Noted.”

“But anyway. What I was saying before.” Harvey lowered his glasses back onto his face. “I believe you, Char, okay? But I don’t think it’s a good idea to get mixed up in any of this. We don’t really know if those creatures have good intentions, or if the thing in the sewers is dangerous. As for trying to hatch a mysterious egg that you’ve been *told* will summon a demon...well, as your doctor I really can’t advise that.” He cracked a weak smile, giving Charlie’s knee a squeeze. “And as your husband, I really *really* can’t advise it.”

“What about as a scientist, with an inquisitive mind?” Charlie asked.

“As a scientist, I’d say there is a very good chance, scientifically speaking, that a demon chicken would immediately murder all the other chickens in the coop.”

Charlie gasped, clutching his heart. “Oh my god,” he whispered. “I didn’t think of that.”

“Well, that’s why I’m here. To think of the worst-case scenario,” Harvey joked, smiling at him more genuinely. Charlie gave a hiccuping laugh, leaning forward to rest his head on Harvey’s collarbone; Harvey’s arms came around him automatically, their warmth creeping into his tense muscles. Instantly, he felt a little better. At least not *everything* in the world was bizarre and new.

“It’s been a really weird day,” Charlie murmured, letting his eyes fall shut. “I’m not really sure what to do with myself now.”

“That’s a lot of discoveries for one day. It’ll take some time to process.” Harvey’s hand rubbed soothing circles into his back. “But try not to worry about it too much, honey. As long as you don’t go hatching monsters in the chicken coop, I don’t think any of this is going to affect us too much.”

“You’re probably right.”

“Charlie, slow down!” Harvey laughed behind him, and Charlie grinned into the wind.

“No way! We’re not missing it this year. I promised, remember?”

“We have plenty of time!” Harvey insisted, but he stopped protesting and wrapped his arms more securely around Charlie’s waist. The rack on the back of Charlie’s bike was, as it turned out, exactly the right size to support one tall, skinny doctor. It wasn’t a totally *safe* method of transportation, but it got them where they were going and gave them an excuse to cuddle the whole way. They clattered over the bridge down to the beach, then coasted to a stop in the sand. Harvey was right; they *did* have lots of time, only about half the village had arrived so far.

“Let’s get a good spot,” Charlie said, and held out his hand to lead Harvey to the dock. As they passed the little groups of gathered villagers, they called out greetings; Maru was there with her parents already, waving and smiling. Marnie, Jas and Shane had arrived too, but when Charlie waved at him, Shane seemed not to notice. He was fixated on something on the beach. Charlie followed the line of his gaze and smirked; it seemed that something was Maru.

The Moonlight Jellies wouldn’t arrive for at least another twenty minutes, so Charlie and Harvey settled on the end of the dock. “Hey,” Charlie prompted as they sat, “is Maru seeing anyone? Has she talked to you about it?”

“What?” Harvey let out a startled-sounding laugh. *“Maru?* No. I mean, I don’t think so; she’s never said anything to me. Who would she be seeing?”

“Oh, nobody in particular. I just wondered.”

“I don’t think she’s all that interested in dating,” Harvey mused, glancing over at her. “She’s never mentioned anyone in town, at any rate. Not much of a romantic.”

“Yeah,” Charlie agreed absently, chancing another look at Shane. He was still staring at Maru, but the moment she turned her head, he whipped his head around to look out at the waves. *Interesting.* Charlie had wondered; he was pretty sure they’d slept together after the wedding, but he didn’t know if it had gone beyond that at all. What did it mean that Maru hadn’t told Harvey, one of her closest friends? Had she kept it to herself because it was nothing? Or had she kept it to herself because it was *something?* Whatever it was, Charlie hoped they were both on the same page. Shane was just starting to become kind of functional; Charlie worried what would happen if he threw some unrequited love into the mix.

“Oh, I keep meaning to ask you,” Harvey began, jolting Charlie out of his musings. “That weird egg, it disappeared a few days ago. You didn’t...hatch it, did you?”

“Of course not. I told you I wouldn’t,” Charlie said. Harvey rubbed a hand over the back of his head, looking embarrassed.

“You’re right. I’m sorry. I shouldn’t have doubted you.”

“I gave it to Shane,” Charlie went on. *“He’s* gonna hatch it.”

Harvey’s head whipped around to stare at him, and Charlie smiled sheepishly. “Don’t worry,” he added. “I doubt it’ll even hatch, honestly.”

Harvey seemed to be struggling to find a response. “Let’s hope not,” he said at last.

They sat in silence while the dock filled up with their neighbors, leaning on each other. Charlie, worn out from a long day of harvesting the last summer crops, let his eyes drift closed. The motion of the waves lulled him, the warmth of his husband chasing away the slight evening chill. Every once in a while, Harvey spoke to a passing neighbor, and Charlie felt the rumble under his cheek. It was nice, to let himself doze off and know that Harvey would wake him when the important stuff happened.

He felt as though he'd barely closed his eyes when Harvey was shaking him gently. "They're here, my love," he whispered, and Charlie struggled back to the waking world. Harvey got to his feet, reaching both hands down to help Charlie up. "You don't want your feet in the water when they get close," he explained. "Better stand up."

Charlie did, looking out over the water. A faint blue glow was growing steadily, heading their direction. Around the two of them, all the villagers fell silent; even Vincent and Jas kept quiet, staring out at the mysterious sight. Beside him, Harvey shivered a little, and without a second thought Charlie wrapped his arm around his husband's waist. Harvey's arm settled across his shoulders, and they stood like that for a long time, watching the jellies approach.

Eventually, they filled the water as far as the eye could see, and Charlie understood what had so transfixed Harvey about them. It was a surreal, otherworldly sight, as though the fish were just passing through their ocean on their way between dimensions. Their light turned everything around them blue: the water, the dock, Charlie's own hand. He turned his head to look up at Harvey, and found that Harvey was watching him, his face illuminated by the fish. Charlie couldn't help the smile that unfolded across his face; the look Harvey gave him in return was unreadable, full of emotion.

"What is it?" Charlie murmured, and Harvey smiled, ducking his head.

"Nothing," he said softly, "just remembering a dream I had once."

"Was it a nice dream?"

"The best."

And they stood, arms around each other and surrounded by their friends, until the last bit of blue faded away with the summer.

Chapter End Notes

You all were so nice about the wedding yesterday, and so supportive about the upcoming action/adventure shift! I'm really excited to share these later chapters with you. Some of them get very, very long, so thanks so much for sticking with me!

Tomorrow: Charlie's wine makes its way into the world. Harvey makes some adjustments to his schedule. The two of them make a big decision.

Chapter 23: Fall, Year 2

Chapter Summary

> Charlie's wine makes its way into the world. Harvey makes some adjustments to his schedule. The two of them make a big decision.

Chapter Notes

> A very minor injury with a tiny bit of blood in this chapter, along with some light angst. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Question,” Charlie began, propping his chin on Harvey’s chest. Harvey’s hand stroked up and down Charlie’s bare spine almost of its own volition; he closed his eyes like a contented cat. Harvey wouldn’t have been surprised to hear him purr. “Any plans this weekend?”

Harvey chuckled. “You would have been the one to make them,” he pointed out. “I don’t think so? Why, did you have something in mind?”

“Kind of.”

As it turned out, Charlie’s first full batch of wine was ready to bottle. Nearly all of it was made from his homegrown grapes, except a few kegs he’d apparently reserved for blackberry wine for Harvey. The little shed was packed to the gills with kegs, and Charlie thought it would take him a week to bottle alone. “But I think the two of us could knock it out in a weekend,” he said, “if you think the clinic could spare you.”

Harvey did. Miraculously, the usual flu outbreak hadn’t hit yet, and things were slow. He had a chat with Maru about it the next day, and on Saturday, he headed into the shed instead of the clinic. By any objective measure, it was tedious work; Charlie funneled exactly the right amount of wine into each bottle before handing it off to Harvey, who used a little machine to cork it and tucked it into crates. But Harvey was used to spending his Saturdays sitting in the clinic, not goofing around with Charlie with the shed’s windows open to the fall sunshine and upbeat music playing. To him, it was a welcome change.

“These labels are pretty,” he remarked, examining one as he smoothed it onto a bottle. “Who designed them?”

“Leah!” Charlie replied, grinning. “I thought having some original artwork on them might make them look a little more legit.”

They did, indeed, knock it out in a weekend. At the end of it, a veritable mountain of crates towered over the shipping box; it would take Lewis days to get them all shipped. Charlie hadn’t even known what to charge, so he’d told Lewis just to ask Gus for his opinion. If they were lucky, Charlie had told him, they might make a couple thousand gold—enough to pay off the last of his loans and make some improvements around the farm. Harvey helped Charlie get his next batch into kegs, then went back to work on Monday and mostly forgot about it. In the meantime, Charlie had cranberries to plant, and then the flu outbreak *did* hit, and Harvey spent the next two weeks completely buried under a mountain of paperwork and antibacterial gel.

It was *early.* It was early even by Harvey’s standards. And Harvey voluntarily got out of bed at five thirty A.M. on weekends to read before work. So who the hell was knocking?

“Hnnnghhhhhhsitttttt,” Charlie moaned beside him, burrowing into Harvey’s chest as though he could muffle the noise that way. Harvey glared blearily in the direction of the door for approximately twelve seconds, before remembering that he was a *fucking doctor* and someone pounding on the door at four thirty in the morning likely meant a major medical emergency.

“Charlie, honey, let me up,” he urged, trying to extract his arm as the pounding continued. “I think it’s an emergency. Char, I’ve got to answer it.” At last, he managed to pull himself away, Charlie’s hands still groping disconsolately in the air like the zombie hands in the haunted maze. Harvey pulled on his discarded pajamas as hastily as he could, hopping into his pants as he shoved the glasses onto his face. When at last he pulled open the door, he squinted into the murky predawn light, failing to stifle a yawn in the visitor's face.

“Ma—Ma—Mayor Lewis,” he managed, “is everything all right? Should I get my bag?”

Lewis, for his part, looked perfectly chipper and composed. He held a steaming travel mug in one hand, a knit cap pulled down over his ears. In his other, he held a canvas tote bag that appeared to be straining under its own weight. He grinned at Harvey like a person who hadn’t just woken an entire household before dawn. Scratch that: he heard the telltale sounds of Bones hopping into his side of the bed, and a moment later, both his dog and his husband snoring. *Traitors.*

“No, no, nothing’s wrong, my boy! I came to do the shipping rounds, and I have Charlie’s take from yesterday.”

“Oh.” Where was the medical emergency? Was Lewis still getting to that? “Don’t you usually just...leave it in the box?” Lewis’s grin widened, and he produced the tote bag with a flourish.

“I didn’t want to leave *this* in the box,” he said conspiratorially. “Tell that man of yours I’m proud of him. Apparently the folks in Zuzu City are just dying to try a Stardew Valley wine.”

Harvey accepted the bag, then nearly fell over at its unexpected weight. Lewis winked, turning away, and whistled his way back to his truck; Harvey stood stupidly for a moment longer before realizing he hadn't even thanked the man. Oh, well: nobody's manners were perfect an hour before dawn.

He stepped back into the house, shivering, and deposited the bag on the kitchen table with a *thunk.* An envelope poked out of the top, so Harvey opened it, curious what their weekend of bottling had earned them. For a moment, he squinted at the paper, his sleep-addled brain not putting the numbers together; then…

"Holy *SHIT!"*

"Wharrvv?" Charlie and Bones bolted upright in bed, both sets of eyes still closed. "Yokay?"

"Charlie, oh my God, I mean Yoba, I mean—oh my *God,"* Harvey babbled, rushing to the side of the bed with the invoice clutched in his fist. "It was Lewis, he was bringing the money from the wine, look at this!" He thrust the paper under Charlie's nose, waiting impatiently for his husband to wake up and read it. It took almost longer than he could bear, but he knew the exact moment it registered, because Charlie let out an unholy wordless shriek.

"That can't be right! Is that *right?"*

"It's in the bag! It's all here!" Harvey rushed back to the table and seized the bag, dumping its contents onto the bed; both of them sat and stared for a long moment in awed silence. Harvey had never seen that much money, had never even *dreamed* that he would. It was maybe more than he took home in a year at the clinic. No wonder Lewis hadn't wanted to leave it outside. Harvey wished Pelican Town had a bank, then stifled a hysterical laugh. He'd never had enough money to *care* whether there was a bank or not.

"Harvey," Charlie said in a hushed voice, "we have a whole next batch of this in kegs. It'll be ready to bottle in a month." He raised his eyes to Harvey's, and suddenly it clicked: this wasn't a one-off windfall. They would make *another* pile like this in a month or so, and another after that. Even leaving a break during the winter, they could be absolutely rolling in gold if they kept this up.

Harvey hadn't ever really cared about money that much, in the abstract. His needs were simple; he bought model airplanes and vinyl records, made the occasional improvement to his radio setup, and went out to dinner with Charlie. Nearly all of his money went to keeping the clinic up and running, and he'd never minded that fact. But since coming to Pelican Town, he'd also never had *enough;* the clinic was always on the verge of closing, with only some creative scheduling of bills standing between him and bankruptcy. Now, faced with a future in which he didn't have to scrape together every cent, he hardly knew what to do with himself. The old anxiety had been with him for so long, he felt off-balance without its weight.

"I don't think I can go back to sleep," he said sheepishly, and Charlie laughed.

"No way," he agreed. "We should probably just go make coffee. Or," he added thoughtfully, glancing at the bed, "would it be in bad taste to swim around in our money like Scrooge McDuck?"

“I think it would probably be in bad taste not to,” Harvey said solemnly.

They celebrated that night by drinking a bottle of their wine on the beach. As they neared the end of their first bottle, Leah and Elliott came out of the writer’s cabin to see what they were laughing about, and so good manners dictated they open another. They toasted to Charlie’s farming, Leah’s art, Harvey’s help bottling, and then, because it seemed rude to exclude him, Elliott’s hair. Harvey worried vaguely that this might seem patronizing, but Elliott was apparently as vain as he was pretty, because he accepted the toast without question. Gesturing grandly to the pier, he declared that Charlie and Harvey could feel free to make use of his ship whenever they liked, apparently meaning the tiny rowboat bobbing in the surf. All in all, it was a hilarious evening, and Harvey lost all count of how many glasses he’d had.

The morning was far less hilarious. His walk to the clinic felt five hours long, and the beautiful autumn sunshine felt hateful, as though it were trying to pierce his eyeballs on purpose. At the clinic, he muddled his way through a series of follow-up appointments while trying desperately to hide his hangover. He sent Clint out the door with a prescription for antibiotics, then let his head thud onto the cool surface of his exam room desk. A moment later, the door creaked open, and he groaned.

“Yoba, Maru, I need a break,” he pleaded. “Please don’t send anyone back for a few minutes.”

“A break sounds like a great idea,” came Charlie’s voice, and Harvey nearly melted with relief. “Got time for a cup of coffee with me?”

Vicious sunshine or no, tradition was tradition, and so the two of them settled on the bench near the fountain to sip balefully at their coffees. “Surviving?” Charlie asked, his red eyes hidden behind sunglasses.

“Barely. This is helping, though.” He gestured to Charlie with his mug, smiling ruefully. “Thanks for bringing it.”

“Oh, anytime, darlin.’ Actually, I had to run an errand in town anyway, so it was on my way.”

“Oh?”

Charlie produced a rolled-up piece of paper from his bag, handing it over to Harvey. “I was going to put this up on the board outside Pierre’s,” he said. “What do you think?”

It was an advertisement for a job, Harvey realized. Charlie was looking to hire a farmhand. “I just think I’ve reached the limit of what I can do alone,” Charlie went on. “I have so much more land, and lots of ideas, but there are only so many hours in a day, you know? I was hoping somebody might be looking for work.”

“That’s a good idea,” Harvey said neutrally. Should he…? No. Surely it was a ridiculous suggestion. “I know you could use the help.”

But Charlie knew him too well, raising an eyebrow and tilting his head to the side. “Did you have a better idea?” he asked, and Harvey’s cheeks burned.

“No, no. Not at all.”

“Harvey.”

Harvey sighed, rubbing a hand over the back of his neck. “Well, I had kind of thought...it’s a silly idea, I know, but maybe I could help you sometimes? I mean,” he barreled on, “I know I’m probably not all that helpful, really. But I like working with you. And I like being at home on the farm. And maybe...the clinic doesn’t need me every day, necessarily? And I could maybe keep it open two or three days a week for appointments, and get a phone outside the front door and one at our house so I could be on call the rest of the time? And maybe I could charge people less since I won’t be spending as much to keep it open every day?” Charlie was just staring at him, so Harvey instantly backpedaled. “You know what, never mind. I haven’t really thought it through that much, so—”

“You want to work on the farm?” Charlie asked. Harvey wanted to punch himself.

“Well, only if, um, you know, you’d want—” He stopped talking then, because Charlie’s mouth was on his, and it was difficult to keep stammering while being kissed. He pulled back, confused, to find Charlie grinning at him.

“Are you joking? Of course I want that! You and I could spend so much more time together!” Charlie said this without a trace of self-consciousness, and once again Harvey recalibrated his expectations: wanting to spend time together was apparently perfectly reasonable, not clingy or annoying. “Do you really want to? Are you sure it’ll be okay to close the clinic for most of the week?”

“Usually I only have one or two appointments a day, tops,” he said, feeling his own face tentatively mirror Charlie’s grin. “I can pretty easily schedule those onto just Tuesdays and Thursdays, or something. I’d have to get a phone, and it would be kind of expensive to run the lines to the house, but—”

“That’s no problem,” Charlie insisted.

“And, well, I know it’s your farm and your money, so if you’d rather hire someone who knows what they’re doing, or if you want me to keep charging normal rates at the clinic, I completely understand,” he finished, doing an admirable job of pretending the suggestion wouldn’t crush him entirely.

“Darlin’,” Charlie said firmly, putting his hands on Harvey’s knees. “First of all, it’s not *my* farm or *my* money, it’s *ours*. We’re in this together, and anyway, you helped! All of this belongs to both of us, okay?”

“Well,” Harvey said, rubbing the back of his head sheepishly, but Charlie went on.

“Second, do you really think I’m going to discriminate against anyone for being new at this?” He laughed, and after a moment, so did Harvey. “I’ve been a farmer for less than two years.

I'm not exactly an old pro. And anyway…" He leaned in to press another kiss to Harvey's mouth, very softly. Harvey closed his eyes, savoring it. "It's clingy of me, I know, but watching you walk off to work is the worst part of my day. I'm selfish; I want as much of your time as I can get."

Oh. Charlie was clingy, too?

"And third, charge whatever you want. Stop charging people at all, for all I care. I'm serious. You and I don't need this much money; we can expand the farm *and* put some away and *still* have enough left to cover the clinic, I bet."

Harvey's eyes went wide. "You'd do that?" he asked breathlessly. Charlie gave his knee a squeeze.

"This town has been so good to me," he said gently. "To both of us. I understand if you don't want to do unpaid work, but I'd love to help however I can. Let's crunch the numbers tonight."

They did, and provided nothing catastrophic happened before they had time to build up their safety net, Charlie was right: Harvey didn't need to charge for appointments at all, only for medications and treatments. And so, after talking it over with Maru (who had mostly only worked on Tuesdays and Thursdays and thus wasn't really affected at all), Harvey made the change. They had a phone installed at the front door of the clinic, then another at their house (which privately made Harvey feel like Batman or something, with their dedicated emergency line). As Maru took new appointments, she let people know about the change, and any grumbling was quickly forestalled by the news that routine appointments would now be free of charge. Two weeks after they'd made the decision, Harvey went home after work on Thursday, got up on Friday, and just...didn't leave. It was the strangest feeling, as though he were skipping school. He wondered how long it would take him to get used to it.

When he walked into the kitchen, Charlie was seated at the kitchen table with two mugs of coffee—and a wrapped package. He beamed at Harvey, pushing the box toward his seat. "Good morning, Number One," he said. "Don't get too excited. It's nothing romantic, but I think they'll come in handy."

The gift turned out to be a nice, sturdy pair of brown leather boots. Harvey laughed at his own foolishness; it hadn't even occurred to him that his everyday shoes wouldn't work as farm gear. "I'm suddenly feeling totally unprepared for this," he admitted, lacing the boots onto his feet.

"Don't worry. When I first came here I seriously considered buying a pair of overalls. Nobody has any idea what they're doing on day one." He leaned over to stroke a hand through Harvey's hair, his smile softening. "I just can't believe we get to work together now, too. This is like a dream."

It really was, Harvey thought, as he followed Charlie outside. It was nothing like the dreams he'd had as a child, but as he followed his husband into their barn, their cluster of adorable baby animals rushing excitedly toward him, he thought it might be even better.

* * * * *

“So remind me why they’re coming here?” Harvey called from the next row over.

Charlie dragged his basket another few feet down his row, plucking another bunch of grapes and dropping it gently in. “Marnie and Jodi are going to a concert in the city. Some guy I’ve never heard of, but they were both freaking out about him. They’re staying overnight, and Shane and Sam both have to work at Joja until late, so Marnie asked if we could watch the kids until they finish their shifts.” A thought occurred to him, a little too late. “Is that okay? I didn’t even think to ask.”

“Of course it’s okay!” Harvey’s slightly sweaty face popped through a gap in the grapevines and grinned at him. “It sounds like fun. But should we have gotten, I don’t know, some toys or something? Are they going to be bored?”

Charlie was proud of himself: he’d put some thought into this. “Farms are super fun for kids,” he insisted confidently. “Come on. We’ve got baby animals, snacks, dogs, fire pits. Who needs toys? Toys are lame.”

“Of course, dear,” Harvey laughed, retreating to his own row to resume picking.

It all went really well. At first.

Moments after Marnie and Jodi had left the farm in a flurry of kisses and hugs, Vincent went tearing off to the barn. Jas followed at his heels, and Charlie and Harvey after her. “Goose is a little shy,” Harvey informed them in a soft voice, pushing the door open. “So we’ll need to be kind of quiet around her, okay?”

He shouldn’t have worried. Jas was an old pro at making friends with cows; within minutes, she had both Goose and Belle literally eating out of her hands. She pressed her face against Belle’s soft white neck, making little cooing noises, while Vincent laughed hysterically over Electra’s determined attempts to eat his shirt. Charlie sat on the barn floor, Louie wedging himself happily into his lap.

“Did you know goats can eat poison ivy?” Jas asked Charlie, who nodded, beaming. Vincent looked aghast.

“Doesn’t it make their tongue itchy?!”

“No, dummy.”

“That’s not very nice, Jas,” Charlie chided, and she threw a half-hearted “sorry” over her shoulder as she followed Goose to the water trough. Vincent didn’t seem to be paying her attention anyway, having moved on to petting Louie. He stroked the lamb’s head with a careful, determined gentleness, jumping backward when Louie bleated at him.

“It’s okay!” Charlie assured him, laughing. “He likes you.”

“He does?”

Charlie chatted with Vincent about the noisy tendencies of sheep for a while, keeping an eye on Jas out of the corner of his eye. At one point he glanced up to find Harvey watching him, his eyes impossibly soft. Charlie gave him a questioning look, but Harvey just smiled and shook his head, *it’s nothing.* The next moment, Vincent wanted to know how long a sheep’s fleece would get if you didn’t shear it, and Charlie had to rack his brain for an answer. (He was too proud to tell this kid that he’d never actually *sheared* a sheep before.)

“Can we pet the chickens too?” Vincent asked hopefully, after they’d been in the barn for quite a while. Jas floated back over to the group, interested.

“I don’t see why not,” Charlie said. “Just be careful. Pizza doesn’t really like being petted by anybody but me; he might not let you touch him.”

Vincent was off like a shot, out of the barn door before Charlie could even get Louie out of his lap. “Wait!” Charlie called, struggling with the lamb, but Harvey was faster.

“I’ll go keep an eye on him,” he said, slipping out after Vincent. Jas rolled her eyes as Charlie got to his feet, waiting for him at the door.

“He’s such a baby,” she complained.

“He’s just excited,” Charlie protested, smiling. They took their time strolling to the coop; it was a beautiful afternoon, the sun settling low in the sky. Glancing toward the house, he saw Bones snoozing on the wraparound porch. Jas stopped to examine a pumpkin vine, which had just barely begun to put out tiny, apricot-sized baby pumpkins.

“They’re so cute,” she cooed, turning one over gently in her hand. “I wish Aunt Marnie grew plants. I like our cows, but you have both.”

“Do you want to be a farmer when you grow up?”

“No!” Jas said it so vehemently that Charlie almost laughed; then, she seemed to realize she’d been a little rude, and looked abashed. “No offense, Mr. Charlie. But I want to be a doctor.”

“I’m not offended. I like doctors,” Charlie said, and she grinned at him.

“I know.” She resumed walking, and Charlie followed. “Can you believe Dr. Harvey knows how to sew up people’s skin and fix their bones?”

“He fixed my legs when I got burned once, too,” Charlie added. Jas stared at him, eyes round.

“He’s so cool,” she sighed, and Charlie nearly choked, wishing devoutly that he’d been recording this conversation. “You’re really lucky.”

“Believe me, I know it.”

They arrived outside the chicken coop, where Vincent and Harvey crouched in the grass. Baby and Ginger crowded close to them, begging for attention, which Vincent was happily providing. Harvey seemed to be mid-lecture, gently pushing aside some of Baby's hackle feathers to show Vincent the fluffy down underneath.

"—so they're always soft like a baby chick under here, see? That keeps them warm."

"Whoa," Vincent said in a hushed tone, stroking his fingers through her fluff. "Do they all have that?"

"Yes, they do. Actually, Blue Ivy isn't quite full-grown yet, so she still has some on her belly that isn't covered." Harvey pointed at the blue chicken, and Vincent's face lit up.

"Cool!" He hopped to his feet, crossed the distance in three steps, and scooped Blue Ivy up into his arms before any of them could react. Blue Ivy let out a startled squawk, and Charlie darted forward, gesturing wildly.

"Vincent, put her down! She doesn't like to be picked up, she might—"

But Blue Ivy wasn't the problem. At the sound of her cries, Pizza came barreling around the corner of the coop, a manic gleam in his eye. Harvey lunged for the rooster—heroically, Charlie thought, since Pizza would almost certainly have mauled him—but he dodged, leaping up to lash out at Vincent with his claws. Red bloomed across Vincent's arm, and he dropped Blue Ivy with a cry of pain. Both Blue Ivy and Pizza tore off around the corner, while Charlie and Harvey both dropped to their knees beside Vincent.

"Oh, shit," Charlie blurted, his stomach lurching at the blood dripping between Vincent's fingers. Jodi was going to *murder* him, what had he been thinking, why hadn't he locked Pizza up—

"Don't cuss!" Vincent wailed, cradling his wound, and Harvey took his arm gently in both hands. Vincent let him, but kept the wound covered, sobbing.

"Is he going to *die?"* Jas demanded, and Vincent cried even harder.

"No one's going to die!" Charlie insisted weakly. Harvey straightened, picking Vincent up and setting off toward the house.

"Charlie's right. You'll be fine, Vincent, those scratches aren't deep. But we need to clean them up and put some bandages on them, okay? Can I do that?"

Vincent nodded, sniffling, and Harvey carried him off. Jas fell into step behind them, shouting, "I'll help!" At last, Charlie followed, feeling utterly useless.

It turned out he pretty much *was* useless. Harvey was doctor, teacher, and entertainment in one, explaining what he was doing as he did it. They sat at the kitchen table, Vincent perched on the edge, while he carefully swabbed the scratches. Harvey had been right, they weren't deep, but they looked angry and raw all the same. Jas was an excellent nurse, quickly handing over any supplies Harvey asked for. Once Vincent's pain and shock subsided, he

became just as interested in the process; he asked a thousand questions as Harvey worked, and Harvey patiently answered them.

“Can you see my bones?”

“No, these grazes aren’t deep enough.”

“Have you ever seen somebody’s bones?”

“Oh, yes, lots of times.”

“Were they gross?”

“No, not really.”

“Oh.”

“...But the organs were.”

“Cool!”

Charlie was the only one at the table not helping in some way. He sat a few feet away from the scene, forehead propped in one hand, wondering if his death at Jodi’s hand would be painful. How had he fucked up the *very first time* he’d ever been asked to watch a neighbor’s child in the Valley? He’d actually been thinking of asking Harvey how he felt about having kids, which seemed totally laughable now. If he couldn’t keep one six-year-old safe for a couple of hours, he clearly had no business reproducing on his own. At least they were doing well financially now; he’d be able to handle it if Jodi decided to sue him, which she totally would, totally *should,* he’d nearly crippled her kid—

“Charlie. *Charlie,”* Harvey repeated, and Charlie realized he’d been calling his name for a while now.

“Sorry, what?”

“I said, Vincent’s all patched up,” he replied, gesturing to his patient. Vincent’s arm was wrapped neatly in gauze, which both kids examined very intently. “Let’s go back outside, hmm? Maybe not with the animals.”

Charlie gave him a strained smile, trying to convey as much gratitude as he could in one look. “Yeah. Okay. I’ve got something else fun we can do.”

Jas might’ve been familiar with ranch life, but even she had never spent an evening picking grapes and eating them right off the vine. She and Vincent raced down the rows, looking for the darkest, juiciest bunches and shoving handfuls into their mouths. Harvey and Charlie stood at the end of a row, keeping a close eye on them as they spoiled their dinner.

“All right, sweetheart?” Harvey asked, nudging his arm against Charlie’s. Charlie sighed.

“Oh, I’m fine. Just thinking about, you know. How I broke Jodi’s kid and she’s going to kill me. How you did all the work while I just sat around panicking.”

To his surprise, Harvey chuckled, and Charlie turned to him with raised eyebrows. “Jodi’s not going to kill you, love. You don’t know how many times I’ve seen Vincent in the clinic—and I can’t tell you, obviously—but suffice to say, this is nothing new for him. He’s excitable and accident-prone; it’s a dangerous combination.”

“But I was supposed to be watching him,” Charlie protested.

“You *were* watching him. These things happen. She’ll understand.”

Charlie scrubbed a hand over his face, sighing. “I’m sorry I didn’t help.”

“You’re sorry you got out of the way and let the man with the medical license do his job?” Harvey asked, and Charlie laughed despite himself, kicking dirt at him.

“Come on! What are you going to let me apologize for?”

Harvey glanced at the kids, who were toward the other end of the row and not paying any attention to them, and leaned in closer. “Well, you haven’t kissed me since they got here,” he murmured. “That’s totally unconscionable, if you ask me.”

Charlie went up on tiptoe, pressing a warm, chaste kiss to Harvey’s lips. “My apologies,” he whispered, and they both giggled in an extremely undignified way.

Eventually, they extracted the children from the rows of vines, their hands and mouths stained purple with grape juice. Harvey made them dinner (just grilled cheese, but Charlie had made the bread, cheese, and butter himself) while Charlie busied himself outside. By the time they’d finished their sandwiches, it was totally dark and Charlie had a roaring bonfire in the pit.

They settled outside with mugs of cocoa, even though it wasn’t really cold enough to warrant them; it just seemed like the kind of thing you gave kids at a bonfire, and neither of them complained. A few hours had passed since the disastrous chicken incident, and Charlie had started to loosen back up. He still worried about what would happen when Jodi came home and saw the state of Vincent’s arm, but at least that wouldn’t happen tonight. Somehow, Charlie couldn’t find it in himself to be afraid of Sam.

“Tell us a story,” Vincent prompted, and Charlie and Harvey looked at each other.

“I’m not a very good storyteller,” Harvey said, glasses twinkling in the firelight, “but Charlie is. Maybe he’ll give us one.”

“Hmm.” Charlie thought for a moment. “Do you want a made-up story, or a true story?”

“True story!” both kids shouted in unison. Well, that made things easier.

“Okay.” Charlie scooted forward on his log, settling into a more dramatic stance. “Well. Do you guys remember my grange display at the festival last year? How I had that big diamond

in it?"

"Yeah!"

"Well, here's how I got it. I went to the mines to try and find some ore, because I was building those sprinklers you saw earlier. The mine is really big, and there are lots of floors, and that day I decided to go as deep as I could. It was deeper than I'd ever gone before, and it was really cold down there. There were icicles on the ceiling, and the floor was slippery. I took a few steps in, but I was having a hard time staying on my feet, so I thought maybe I'd go back.

"But right when I turned around, I heard something rattling, around a bend in the path. I knew I could leave and get away from it, but I was too curious. I wanted to know what it was."

"Honey, this might be a little scary for them," Harvey said uneasily, but both children shook their heads vehemently.

"It's not too scary!"

"I wanna know what happened!"

Charlie winked at Harvey in what he hoped was a reassuring way before going on. "Well, I turned back around and made my way down the path, slowly, trying to be really quiet. I got my sword out too, just in case. The rattling got louder, and louder, and louder. And finally, I came around the corner, and I saw…"

"What?!" Jas shrieked.

"A skeleton."

Both children, and Harvey, made hushed noises of alarm.

"It was walking around, but it hadn't noticed me. It was wearing armor, like maybe it had been a soldier once? I could see a chest behind it, but I couldn't get to it without going through the skeleton. So I snuck up on it, really quiet, like this...and when I got close, I took my sword and hit it as hard as I could. And it totally fell apart, just a big pile of bones."

"Oh my gosh!" Vincent cried, leaping to his feet.

"And the diamond was in the chest?" Jas asked, on the edge of her seat.

"No." Charlie grinned. "There was nothing in the chest except some worn-out old boots. But when I turned back around, I saw it. Something sparkly, right in the skeleton's skull. So I picked it up and shook it, and...that's how I got the diamond."

"You fought a *real skeleton!"* Vincent shouted, hopping around in a circle. It occurred to Charlie, belatedly, that maybe both of them were a little too sugared-up to be telling exciting stories at this time of the night. For once, Jas had dropped the "grown-up" act, and was jumping around with Vincent. Charlie had expected them to be a little spooked—what were

bonfires for, if not ghost stories?—but the only person who looked scared was Harvey. He inched closer to Charlie, putting a hand on his knee as if to reassure himself Charlie was real.

“You never told me that story,” he said in an undertone, and Charlie reached up to ruffle his hair.

“It wasn’t as dramatic as it sounds. I promise. I wasn’t ever in real danger.”

“Hello!” called a new voice, and all four of them shrieked, even Charlie (to his intense embarrassment). Two figures approached out of the darkness, the firelight finally revealing them: Shane and Sam, in their Joja uniforms.

“Well, glad to see you haven’t been scaring them,” Shane said dryly.

“I’m not scared!” Jas protested, running to him. “Mr. Charlie was telling us a good story.”

“Vince, what happened to your arm?” Sam asked, examining it, and Charlie’s stomach lurched. Harvey wrapped an arm around his shoulders, silently offering support.

“Um, well, we had a little incident with—” Charlie began, but Vincent interrupted.

“That mean boy chicken scratched it.”

“Yes, that’s what happened,” Charlie agreed weakly. Sam laughed, dropping Vincent’s arm and giving him an affectionate little push.

“What’d you do to make him mad?”

“I picked up the blue chicken.”

“Well, that’s what you get for annoying the animals, huh?” Sam asked lightly, and Vincent gave a somber nod. Charlie blinked, feeling as though he’d escaped the gallows. Was that *it?*

“Sam, please tell your mom I’m really sorry, it was an accident and—”

“Oh, he gets banged up all the time. Don’t worry about it. I think he’ll survive.” Vincent suddenly gave a cavernous yawn, and Sam hoisted him up onto his shoulders. “If I get him to bed, anyway. C’mon, guys. Time to go.”

To Charlie’s secret delight, both kids protested loudly at this. “I want another story!” Vincent insisted, even as he rubbed his eyes. Their guardians gently refused, leading them toward the southern path out of the farm.

“Doc, farm boy,” Shane called back over his shoulder, hand-in-hand with Jas. “Thanks for keeping an eye on them. I owe you one.” Suddenly, Jas broke away, dashing back to throw her arms around first Charlie’s legs, then Harvey’s.

“Thank you,” she whispered, her shyness creeping back in, and then she returned to Shane. With one last wave over their shoulders, their visitors headed toward home.

* * * * *

“Those two are a handful,” Charlie said, covering a yawn with the back of his hand. “I don’t know how Penny does it all the time.”

“They are,” Harvey agreed, though privately he thought it was one of the most fun evenings he’d had in ages. (Minus the frankly terrifying story about the skeleton.)

“Cute, though,” Charlie remarked. Harvey hummed in agreement, and they went back to sipping their wine in silence. It really was a perfect night; just barely warm enough to be outside, the last embers of the fire dying down. Bones performed his evening patrol in a desultory way, strolling around the perimeter rather than marching. The more Harvey drank, the more comfortable the blanket felt. He wondered how chilly it would get if he just went to sleep outside.

“Do you ever think about having any? Kids?” Charlie asked, and Harvey was suddenly wide-awake, his heart pounding as though he’d run a marathon. This was it, the minefield he’d been desperately afraid to cross for an entire year, and he had no idea how to proceed.

“Sometimes, I suppose,” he said cautiously, aiming for a nonchalant tone and falling terribly short. He let a brief pause spin out between them— *good, Harvey, keep it casual* —and then added, “Do you?”

Charlie smiled, watching Bones trot after a firefly. “I never used to, much,” he said, “but after I met you...yeah, I do. Think about it a lot, actually. Don’t worry, though. If that’s not something you want—V? What’s wrong?”

At Charlie’s *yeah,* Harvey’s entire body had rebelled against him. The relief was so powerful, so all-consuming, he’d had to lean forward and rest his head on his knees. He felt himself trembling. A year of worry was leaving him all at once, and it seemed determined not to go without taking him to pieces on its way out.

“Harvey, darlin', you’re freaking me out,” Charlie said from very far away, his voice filled with concern. “Talk to me, okay? If you don’t want to have kids, we don’t have to. It was just —”

“I do,” Harvey mumbled, muffled into his knees. “I do.” Oh, Yoba, he was a terrible husband, he couldn’t even pull himself together enough to stop scaring Charlie. Any moment now, he’d be able to straighten up. Any moment—

“You do? Then why—wait,” Charlie said, a tone of suspicion creeping into his voice. Harvey braced himself; this was why he’d wanted to be casual about it. “Is this...really important to you?”

Harvey didn’t want to make it worse, but he couldn’t lie to Charlie. He sat back, scrubbing his hands over his face beneath his glasses. “Um. Kind of?”

“You’ve been really wanting to have kids all this time, and you never said anything to me about it? Why not?” Harvey chanced a peek at Charlie from behind his fingers. He didn’t

look angry, just confused, which Harvey supposed he had reason to be. Sighing, he let his hands drop to the blanket.

“Because I was afraid you wouldn’t want them,” he admitted, and Charlie’s mouth dropped open in surprise.

“But you do! What would you have done if I said no?”

Harvey reached out then, gripping Charlie’s hand hard in an effort to ground himself. “I would have *been your husband,”* he said, pouring all the sincerity he could into it, “and that would have been enough.”

“Harvey,” Charlie said helplessly, squeezing his hand back, “I’m not—that isn’t something you should give up on. That’s too important. We should have talked about it sooner, you deserve to—”

“That, right there,” Harvey interrupted, “that’s what I was afraid of. I could live with you not wanting them, but I was afraid you’d break it off with me, that you’d insist I should find someone who did.”

“Well, I mean—that’s not wrong!”

“It took me almost forty years to find you,” he said fiercely, fighting back the prickling at the corners of his eyes again. “I wasn’t going to give you up. Not for anything. Not even for this.”

Charlie gazed at him for a long moment, the corners of his mouth downturned, and Harvey felt a bone-deep pang of guilt. He knew he should have discussed it with Charlie before they got married, but he’d been a coward. Yoba only knew what Charlie thought of him now. “I don’t want to be the reason you give up on your dreams, darlin’,” he said at last, giving Harvey’s hand a little shake. “Not ever. That’s the opposite of what I want.”

“I’ve given up dreams before,” Harvey said, glancing up at the sky. “You learn, eventually, which ones you can let go, which ones you can’t.” With his free hand, he reached out and cupped Charlie’s face; he was relieved when Charlie leaned into the touch. “You were my best dream ever. You *are.* I...yes, it would have hurt, to give up on children, but I can live without them. I *can’t* live without you.” Charlie didn’t say anything, just stared at him with wide, sad eyes, and Harvey decided he could be brave. He could voice the deepest and most shameful fear. “I know it’s silly, but I...sometimes I felt like I was being greedy, wanting more. I already had you; how much more could I possibly deserve?”

“Oh, sweetheart,” Charlie murmured, and caught Harvey’s hand, pressed a kiss into the palm. “It doesn’t work like that. There’s no—quota of happiness that you can max out. You just have to take it where you can find it.”

Harvey sat for a moment, ruminating on this. He had come a long way, and it was a lot less frequent, but there were still days where he felt like some great cosmic mistake had been made—as though Yoba would show up any day now, full of breathless apologies for the error, and bundle away all the love and joy in his life to its rightful recipient. Reaching for

even more felt like tempting fate, as though it would draw a vengeful deity's attention sooner rather than later.

Charlie deserved better. But...Harvey could *be* better, for him.

"I'm sorry," he said at last, eyes on the ground. "I know it must feel like I didn't trust you, but...I did, that was the problem. I trusted you to be selfless enough to break it off so I could have what I wanted. But what I want most is you."

Charlie tugged Harvey's hand until he bent forward, leaning their foreheads together; Harvey let his eyes drift closed, the tension draining away. "You give me too much credit," he said, his voice a little hoarse. "I'm even more greedy than you are. I only had to wait twenty-eight years for you, but that's just because I want at *least* eighty of them together."

Harvey huffed a laugh, cracking one eye open. "No way are you going to want to have sex with me when I'm a hundred and twenty."

"Try me. And what's more, I want a bunch of little Harveys running around too. *That's* how much I love you. I want tiny versions of your face everywhere I look." Harvey knew Charlie had meant it as a joke, but he felt a little pang of uncertainty, and opened his eyes. They'd reached a delicate peace; he didn't want to ruin it. But Charlie just gazed at him, understanding as always. "Why don't you tell me what *you* want, though. All of it, this time."

Harvey leaned back, taking a deep breath with Charlie's hands in his own. "Don't get me wrong," he said tentatively. "The thought of kids that look like you, or like me—it's—I love it."

"But," Charlie prompted gently.

"But. I always thought...there are kids out there who don't have anybody, Char. I kind of wanted to, um, to adopt one, give them a family, like I always wished I had." His face burned; even though it was just Charlie, and even though he'd asked, it was surprisingly difficult to reveal the biggest, most secret wish he'd been carrying around for all these years. "If that's okay with you."

Charlie smiled at him, warm and slow, unfurling across his face beneath crinkled eyes. "You know, I always think I couldn't love you more," he said, "but you keep proving me wrong."

Harvey's breath left him in a rush. "So you—it's—"

"Of *course.* Of course, V. Nothing would make me happier."

It couldn't really be happening, could it? Could Harvey really be getting absolutely everything he wanted? "So...you want that, too? To be parents?" he asked, every nerve in his body tensed, waiting for the answer.

Charlie didn't keep him waiting long. "Let's be dads," he said, grinning, and Harvey threw his arms around him.

Chapter End Notes

Dads incoming! (In a while, anyway.) I always thought it was kind of hilarious that you never, ever talk about kids in the game until after you're married, and then your spouse just randomly asks you if you want to have a baby. But then I thought that kind of fit with the version of Harvey I've been writing; poor guy is so anxious, I could see him not bringing it up.

I hope you're having a nice weekend! Dr. Harvey says wash your hands! <3

Tomorrow: Robin gets to work. Charlie gets a new nickname. Something is weird in the mines. The Fair comes back around, and a tourist gets a little too friendly with one of our boys.

Chapter 24: Fall, Year 2

Chapter Summary

> Robin gets to work. Charlie gets a new nickname. Something is weird in the mines. The Fair comes back around, and a tourist gets a little too friendly...

Chapter Notes

> Some of you mentioned wishing that Charlie had made good on Harvey's kitchen-table daydream from a while back. Those of you will probably enjoy this chapter. NSFW content ahead!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I *told* you you should have just built it all at once," Robin said smugly, lifting an armful of lumber onto the porch. "I don't need kids' rooms, he said! Nobody to have kids with, he said!"

"Couldn't *afford it,* he also said," Charlie reminded her, rolling his eyes. "That was over a year ago. Things are different now."

"I'll say." Robin looked out over the fields at Harvey, who was patiently trying to coax Goose to join Belle, Electra and Louie in the newly-fenced paddock. He crouched in his boots, jeans, and an old sweatshirt from Ferngill University School of Medicine, looking more at home with hay in his hair than Charlie ever would have dreamed possible. "I knew that man was crazy about you, but I never thought I'd see him wrangling cows."

"I think it has more to do with the cows than me," Charlie laughed, as Goose finally summoned her courage and trotted into Harvey's waiting arms. He fussed and fawned over her loudly enough for the sound to carry to the porch. Charlie's heart was in serious danger of remaining in a permanent puddle these days.

"If you say so. I *was* a little surprised to hear that you're working on those kids so soon. Not that I'm judging," she added hastily, beaming. "I can't wait to see some more little faces running around town."

"Well, it's not like we're going to bring one home tomorrow. Just getting our ducks in a row." Charlie had been a little surprised, too. When he'd raised the subject with Harvey (in that terrifying, gut-wrenching conversation), he'd thought of it as a future thing, something to come back to in a few years. But once Harvey had revealed how badly he wanted kids,

Charlie found he wanted nothing more than to give them to him. He didn't see the point in waiting to start the process; adoption was bound to take some time, they were happy and settled, the farm was doing well, and he knew Harvey already had some feelings about being an older dad. One of them could watch the baby while the other worked, and then they could switch. Maybe Charlie could harvest cranberries with a baby strapped to his back. It was going to be awesome.

And yeah, okay, it did terrify Charlie to his core, but so did most of the good things he'd done in the last two years: becoming a farmer, becoming a boyfriend, becoming a husband, becoming a low-budget Tomb Raider. There was no reason to think this would be any less great of an idea than any of those. And while Charlie definitely had doubts about his *own* parenting abilities, he had none whatsoever about Harvey's. His husband was a sweet, nurturing soul, patient and gentle to his core. Watching him with Vincent and Jas had confirmed what he already knew: he'd be the best dad in the world. They just had to get their baby first, and before they could do that, they needed somewhere to *put* them. So, figuring he might as well help move the process along, Charlie went to help Robin unload her supplies.

Charlie still wasn't sure why he'd devoted nearly a quarter of his fields to flowers this fall. It was true that fairy roses made the best honey—he'd been doing his research—but since he didn't have any beehives yet, there wasn't much point in raising them. They weren't really worth that much. The sunflowers were worth even less.

Still, when he stood on the little knoll overlooking the flower field, it made him happy. The rows and rows of flowers waved gently in the breeze, and he could see bees buzzing between them—not *his* bees, not *profitable* bees, but still. It was awfully scenic. On a whim, he headed down into the field and selected some of his nicest sunflowers, cutting them with the pruners he kept tucked into his belt. A big yellow one, a few smaller auburn ones, and a few that were almost white: he bundled them together, arranging them a little before heading back up to the house.

The scent of onions cooking in butter reached his nose before he'd even stepped onto the porch: Harvey was home from the clinic, then, and working on dinner. Charlie headed into the warm house, kicking off his dirty boots just inside the front door. Harvey was humming over a sizzling pan—Charlie thought he recognized Ray Charles—and Charlie crept up behind him. When he was in range, he wrapped one arm around Harvey's waist, reaching the flowers around with the other.

"Oh!" Harvey laughed, setting down his spatula and taking the bouquet. "These are beautiful, honey. Yours?"

"Yep," Charlie confirmed, pressing a kiss to the side of Harvey's neck before releasing him. Harvey turned, smiling at him as he sniffed the flowers.

"What's the occasion?"

"I hadn't given you a present yet today."

Harvey reached behind him to turn off the stove, then stepped forward into Charlie's space; he cupped his free hand around the back of Charlie's neck, pulling him in for a proper hello. Charlie swooned a little. It was dumb to miss Harvey on the only two days of the week when he was gone, but he missed him anyway.

"Thank you," Harvey murmured against his lips, finally pulling away. "I love them." He cocked his head a little, looking thoughtful, and then laughed. "Especially this kind. It looks like you." He gestured to an auburn flower, and Charlie could kind of see what he meant: deep rust-colored petals, a tan, freckled center. The color matched his hair almost exactly.

"As long as it's not prettier than me," Charlie said mock-seriously, and Harvey grinned at him.

"Never."

"What are we having? It smells amazing."

"Sit down, sunflower, and you'll find out."

Huh. Harvey hadn't really ever given Charlie any pet names, other than the old standards. Even though he'd been teasing, it made Charlie feel a little bit warm inside. And Harvey must have noticed, because although it was the first time he called Charlie that, it was far from the last.

Something was different in the mine.

It took Charlie a long time to put his finger on it. He was between harvests, nothing ready to pick, and Harvey was working at the clinic that day. With nothing better to do, he'd headed down to do some more exploring. Though he hadn't told Harvey—who he thought would, just possibly, not approve—he'd made it down to the eighty-first floor. It was *hot* down there. At first, it was a welcome change, since the days were turning chillier outside. But after about twenty minutes, it became stifling. Fortunately, if creepily, Charlie had stumbled upon a pair of fireproof boots in a box on the eightieth floor, and they fit him perfectly. He decided not to question it too much, especially when he climbed the ladder down to the next floor and found…

"Holy shit," he mused, shielding his eyes. "The floor really *is* lava."

Rivers of it cascaded down the walls, and silhouetted against the blinding brightness, Charlie could make out various creatures moving around in the distance. Honestly, it all felt a little too dangerous even by his own skewed standards, but then he felt it.

It was a tug, just a little one. A sudden compulsion he could almost ignore. It felt a lot like the urge he got to touch shiny objects, or to kiss Harvey basically whenever he saw him. It wasn't especially strong; he could fight it, could head back up the ladder if he wanted to. For a moment, he almost did. But as he placed his foot on the bottom rung, he turned and

glimpsed the ladder leading down to the next floor. And the urge grew stronger, pointing him down that ladder as clearly as a neon sign.

Obviously, this was more supernatural shit. Charlie wasn't stupid, or at least he hadn't thought so. But meeting Krobus and that Junimo had gone okay, right? He'd followed his dumb impulses then, and he'd been a little shaken up afterward, but nothing *bad* had happened. Maybe there was something amazing down there. Maybe it was a treasure beyond his wildest dreams. Or maybe he was still too hung up on Indiana fucking Jones.

A screech sounded behind his left ear, and Charlie whipped around just in time to knock a bat out of the air with his sword. This one was *red.* "Well, not that creative," he sighed, "but okay." The swing of the sword had taken him a few steps toward the ladder leading down, he noticed. Of course, curiosity got the better of him, as he'd always known it would.

"One floor," he conceded, "I'll check out one floor." And he descended down the ladder, keeping his eyes open for any more bats—or worse.

When he reached the bottom, onto another sweltering and lava-streaked floor, he knew he'd made a mistake. The tug didn't let up: it grew even stronger. Sighing, Charlie looked at his watch. It was six P.M., and if he didn't get home soon, Harvey would wonder where he was. As strong as the pull of the unknown was, the pull of his husband was stronger.

"Not today, Satan," he said aloud, and turned to head back up the ladder.

* * * * *

"Do you think we should let Pierre win next year?" Charlie asked, examining his blue ribbon from the grange competition. "Poor guy looked kind of crushed. I don't want him to stop selling me seeds."

"I think, ideally, Pierre should step up his game," Harvey said. If it came out a little smugly, well, who could blame him? His husband had won two years in a row, and by an even bigger margin this year. *And,* though he hadn't been at it long enough to feel like it made a real difference, Harvey had helped this time. "Actually, it looked like Marnie was going to give you the real run for your money. Those were the biggest eggs I've ever seen."

"Yeah. I honestly think she might've won, if it wasn't for this heat." The day of the Fair had dawned freakishly, unseasonably hot, the sun apparently deciding to give it one last hurrah before disappearing for the winter. If the heat had been unkind to Charlie's produce, it had all but liquefied Marnie's cheeses, and curdled the milk. The smell coming from Willy's overheated fish bin was unspeakable. Charlie had worn shorts and a T-shirt, but Harvey had worn his usual "doctor clothes." It had been a terrible mistake. He was dying to take off his jacket, but he could feel the sodden state of his shirt under it, and so he was stuck with his layers.

The usual cohort of tourists milled around, a bit listlessly in the heat. Harvey was intensely relieved to see Philip hadn't returned this year. A group of young women played the slingshot game, cheering raucously as one of them scored; an older couple walked hand-in-hand, surveying Evelyn's decorations. Harvey turned, pretending to shield his eyes and survey the

crowd, while secretly mopping his forehead with his sleeve. His appetite for carnival games had all but deserted him, and he was dying to get indoors. But Charlie finished surveying his neighbors' grange offerings and turned to him with a bright, "So what should we do next?" Harvey didn't have it in him to disappoint his husband.

They bought a pair of blissfully cold beers from Gus and strolled around, taking it all in. As they passed the fortune-teller's tent, Harvey remembered that Charlie had enjoyed it last year. "Want to go in?" he asked, gesturing at it with his drink; a wide smile unfurled on Charlie's face.

"I don't need to," he said. "My fortune from last year already came true."

"Does that mean you can tell me, finally?"

"Sure." Charlie led him into the shade of a nearby tree, leaning against the trunk. Harvey leaned beside him, their fingers loosely intertwined. "She told me she saw you and I working together on a farm, and that we looked really happy about something." He rolled his head to the side to grin at Harvey. "So you see? It all happened."

Harvey felt a bit speechless at this. "I wonder what we were so happy about, in her vision," he mused at last.

"Maybe it was just how we always look." He raised Harvey's hand to his lips, kissing his knuckles. "I'm pretty sure I look like a besotted idiot ninety percent of the time."

"Only ninety? I'll have to work harder."

They laughed, and then Harvey found he needed to know what that particular laugh of Charlie's tasted like, and he forgot the heat as he lost himself in kissing Charlie up against the tree. He would have happily continued this for some time, and maybe used it as a segue into getting Charlie indoors, but he heard a commotion somewhere in the square. He broke away from Charlie, squinting in that direction, and then heard his name.

"Doctor Harvey!" came Penny's voice. "Come quick!"

"Go, go," Charlie urged him, gesturing. Harvey gave him a last apologetic glance and shoved his beer into Charlie's hand before dashing off in the direction of the sound. When he approached the square, he saw a circle of villagers and tourists crowding around the slingshot game. A frightened-looking blonde woman turned to him, wringing her hands.

"Are you the doctor?" she asked, her voice quavering. "She just passed out! I think she got too hot, maybe."

He pushed his way through the circle to find one of the women he'd noticed earlier, lying flat on the baking cobblestones with her eyes closed. Two of her friends crouched beside her, cradling her head and fanning her with their hands. Harvey dropped to his knees, reaching out to feel the skin of her face. Hot, too hot, but not dry; it wasn't heat stroke, then, most likely just syncope. He gingerly rolled her head from side to side, checking for injuries from the fall.

“Did she hit her head?” he asked the nearest friend briefly, and she shook her head.

“No. We caught her on the way down. Is she going to be okay?”

“I don’t think it’s serious, but we’ll need to get her inside and get some electrolytes in her. Step back, please.” Taking time to go get the stretcher would just leave her lying out in the sun longer; since she hadn’t hit her head, Harvey felt relatively safe moving her on his own. He slipped his arms carefully under her shoulders and knees, lifting her as gently as he could. The circle broke up enough for him to pass through, and one of her friends hovered at his elbow as he walked.

“What’s her name?” he asked, making his way toward the clinic. Up ahead, he saw Maru sprint to the door and unlock it, and suppressed a smile. She really was the best assistant.

“Morgan.”

And you are?”

“Lauren.”

“Okay, Lauren. I’m Doctor Harvey. If you’d like, you can go back to the fair, or you’re welcome to stay with us.”

“I’ll stay,” Lauren declared instantly, and Harvey nodded. Maru held the door open, and he gave her a brief smile of thanks as he edged through sideways. They pushed through the swinging doors to the OR, where he settled her onto a bed. Maru followed them into the room and stood patiently, awaiting instructions.

“Maru, please grab the pillows off that other bed,” he said, checking under Morgan’s eyelids with a penlight. “We need to elevate her legs.” Maru quickly did as he’d asked, settling the pillows under Morgan’s feet and slipping off her shoes. When Harvey was satisfied there was no sign of concussion or optic problems, he reached for his thermometer. “And go get some electrolyte solution ready, okay? We’ll need to get her drinking it as soon as she wakes up.”

Maru scurried off, and he checked the young woman’s temperature. 99.9 degrees; not dangerous, just a little elevated. While Lauren sat silently beside the bed, he checked Morgan’s pulse, then her breathing. His stethoscope was still pressed to her chest when her eyes fluttered open at last.

“Huh?” she asked woozily, rolling her head to the side. “Where…?”

“You’re awake!” Lauren cried, leaning forward to take her hand. “You passed out, Morg. We were so worried about you.”

“Hello, Morgan,” Harvey said, slinging the stethoscope back around his neck and leaning over her bed. “I’m Harvey, the village physician. It seems you got a little overheated outside and fainted. You shouldn’t suffer any long-term effects, but you’ll need to rest in the air-conditioning for a little while. Had you been drinking today?”

“Um, a little,” Morgan stammered, flushing. Harvey shook his head, smiling at her.

“It’s not a judgmental question, I promise. We just need to get some electrolytes back in you.” Maru returned to the room then, carrying an opened bottle with a straw in it; Harvey took it from her with his thanks. “If you can, I’d like you to sit up, but keep your feet elevated. Here, let’s get your pillows propped up.”

After a minute or two of shuffling around, they got Morgan arranged, settling her back onto the pillows. Harvey handed her the bottle of electrolyte solution. “It’s not exactly tasty,” he said apologetically, “but please drink this, slowly. It’ll help you rehydrate.”

“Thank you.” Morgan made a face after her first taste, but dutifully kept sipping at it. Her color was good, the flush receding a little from her face; Harvey thought she would probably be fine within an hour, as long as she kept out of the sun the rest of the day. She glanced at her friend over her cup. “Lor, you should go back out to the fair. I’m fine. No reason to sit in here with me.”

“Oh, come on, I’ll keep you company,” Lauren protested, but her eyes darted toward the door. Morgan shook her head insistently.

“Nah, that’s a total waste! We came all the way here, you might as well enjoy it. Go tell the others I’m not dead. I’ll come find you when Doctor Harvey says I can leave.”

“Well…”

“That cute goth girl might go home if you don’t,” Morgan said slyly, and Lauren was up and moving toward the door.

“Well, if you’re really sure. I’ll come check on you in a while.”

“We’ll take good care of her,” Harvey assured her, biting back a laugh at the thought of what Caroline would say to know her daughter was being pursued by a *tourist.*

“Thanks, doctor. Be back soon!”

Harvey crossed the room to where Maru stood, filling out a chart for the patient. “You might as well go back, too,” he said to her in a low voice. “Honestly, there’s nothing to do but sit around and wait for her to cool down.”

“Don’t have to tell me twice. Call if you need me?”

“Will do.”

Then Maru left, and Harvey was left alone with the young woman quietly sipping her electrolytes. He suddenly remembered how uncomfortable (and unprofessional) he was in his sweaty clothes. “Would you excuse me for just a moment?” he asked, and at her nod, he darted up to his old apartment. Though he hadn’t lived here in months, he kept some spare clothes there in case of spills or—more often in his line of work—bodily fluids. There was no time for a shower, but he took a moment to clean himself up with a damp cloth and change his shirt out for a fresh one. Feeling human again, he returned downstairs; Morgan hadn’t moved, and her color seemed to be improving. He settled in at the small table halfway across

the room, not so close that she would feel like she *had* to speak to him, but close enough that she could. *Might as well get some paperwork done,* he thought, and pulled a stack toward himself.

The quiet didn't last long. "Dr. Harvey?"

He looked up from his papers, keeping his expression bland but friendly. "Yes?"

"How did I get here?"

"Oh, I carried you in from the square."

"Carried me," she repeated, and Harvey wasn't sure what to make of her tone.

"Yes. It was the fastest way to get you indoors, and spending any more time in the sun would have been dangerous." He pushed his glasses up on his nose, a thought occurring to him. "I didn't think you were injured, but I could have missed something. Are you in pain?"

"No, no! I was just curious." She went back to sipping at her drink, and Harvey returned to his paperwork. A moment later, she spoke again. "Do you usually work during the fair?"

"No, but I'm always on call in case someone is injured."

"Oh. Sorry for dragging you in, then."

He looked up at that, giving her a small, reassuring smile. "Please don't apologize. This is my job, and I'm happy to help."

"It must be a lot of work, being the only doctor in town."

At this, Harvey resigned himself; he obviously wasn't going to get any paperwork done. The clinic was a dull place to be without company, so he understood her desire to chat. "It is, although maybe not as much as you'd think. Certainly less than my old practice in Zuzu City."

"You're from Zuzu! What part of town?"

"Well…"

The better part of an hour passed that way, with Morgan peppering Harvey with questions and him responding. She was a pleasant enough person, though part of him shamefully wished he could be outside with Charlie instead. Still: he was, for the day, her doctor, and bedside manner was part of the job. They discussed his background, her work (sales), the village, her friends. When he noticed her bottle was empty and her color was good, he discreetly checked his watch: nearly five o'clock. If he could get her checked out and on her way, he might still be able to spend the tail end of the fair with Charlie.

He checked her temperature one last time; she fell silent as he brushed her hair away from her ear to insert the thermometer. “Ninety eight point seven,” he read aloud, smiling at her. “Perfectly normal. You’re free to go. Though not back to the fair, I’m afraid, you need to stay out of the heat for at least a full day. Do you think your friends will be ready to go home?”

“I’m sure I can get at least one of them to catch the train back with me,” she said, sounding oddly deflated. Harvey supposed she had been looking forward to the rest of the fair.

“Well, Lauren brought your things inside. She left them up at reception. When you’re feeling ready, go ahead and stand up— *slowly*— and we’ll go get them.”

Morgan swung her legs out of the bed, then pushed herself slowly to a standing position. She swayed a little, and Harvey darted forward to catch her by the arms; she smiled at him shyly, obviously a little embarrassed at needing the help. When he thought she was steady on her own, Harvey released her, leading the way down the corridor to the front desk. The check-out process went quickly. Maru had filled out a chart for her, which he quickly copied and then held out for her to take to her own doctor. “Or if you’d prefer, I can mail it to them,” he offered.

“No, that’s fine, I’ll take it.”

“Okay. Well, in that case, I hope you have a safe trip back to the city. Remember to drink lots of water and stay out of the heat,” he said, smiling and offering a little wave.

Morgan hesitated for a moment, then smiled up at Harvey from beneath lowered lashes. “So, I don’t normally do this,” she began, fiddling with the strap of her purse, “but...I pass through here on the train for work at least once a week. Could I buy you a drink next time I’m in town? As thanks for helping me?”

Oh. Harvey understood now, the million questions, the shy smiles, the lack of enthusiasm about leaving. “There’s really no need to thank me,” he said, aiming for brisk professionalism and hoping she’d get the hint. “It’s my job, after all.”

But then her hand was on his forearm, her body leaning in toward him. “I’d really like to, though,” she insisted. Harvey suppressed a sigh; the subtle approach wasn’t going to work, clearly.

“I’m flattered, really, but I’m actually married,” he said gently, holding up his hand to show her his ring. This also carried the side benefit of getting her hand off his arm, which had begun to make him uncomfortable. Morgan’s eyes widened just a little, and she took a tiny step backward. She wore her disappointment well, just a rueful little smile on her face.

“Ah, I understand.” Her eyes left his face to travel down his body, then back up. *Subtle.* “Your wife’s a lucky one.”

“Husband, actually,” came an icily familiar voice, and Harvey turned to see Charlie standing just inside the door (Harvey hadn’t even noticed the bell). The look on his face was one Harvey had almost never seen before: a hard, unpleasant smile, his eyes glinting dangerously.

It sent a shiver of interest up Harvey's spine, which he fought to ignore. He did still have a patient, after all, even if she was trying very hard to cross the lines of medical ethics.

"Oh, hi, honey," Harvey said lightly, pretending he didn't notice the storm clouds brewing over his husband's head. "Did you need something?"

"I finished up outside, was just coming to see if you were ready to head home." Charlie's expression hadn't changed, and he had barely glanced at Harvey, focused on staring down this interloper. Harvey knew it shouldn't make him happy—jealousy was no fun for the person experiencing it, and anyway there was nothing for Charlie to be jealous *of,* he obviously wasn't going to take Morgan up on her offer—but watching his sweet, kind husband get possessive and feisty was *doing* things for him. He needed this woman to be on her way, so he could find out what *other* kinds of things Charlie might be interested in doing for him.

"I think we're just about wrapped up here," he said, turning to Morgan with a placidly professional smile. "Unless you needed something else?"

"No, no, don't let me hold you up," she said, her tone barely concealing a sigh. "Thanks again, Dr. Harvey. Nice to meet you, um…"

"Charlie," Harvey offered, when it became clear Charlie wasn't going to respond.

"OK. Well. Bye, then." She left with one last glance over her shoulder, meeting eyes with Harvey on her way out the door. The moment she was gone, Harvey came around the desk, stepping into Charlie's space.

"How long were you standing there?" he murmured, leaning down to kiss Charlie's cheek.

"Long enough to see her *touching* you. Was that what I thought it was?"

Harvey bit his lip; he couldn't laugh, but he'd never imagined seeing Charlie like this, puffed up and ready to fight someone for his hand. "Well, if you thought it was her propositioning me…"

"That's what I thought, yes."

"Then no."

Charlie looked taken aback. "No?"

"No. Not yet. She was just asking me out."

That predatory glint came back into Charlie's eye, and he settled firm hands on Harvey's waist. "Are you *teasing* me, doctor?" he asked softly, but his tone was dangerous. In spite of the fact that yes, he *was* teasing Charlie, that shiver ran down his spine again.

"I...wouldn't dream of it?"

"Good." Charlie smirked in a way that Harvey found distinctly menacing. "Then let's go."

“Back to the fair?”

“Oh, no. We’re getting on the bike and going home. *Right* now.”

The door of the farmhouse had barely closed behind them before Charlie was on him: his mouth, his hands, his entire body, all wrapped around Harvey and pushing insistently. Harvey ended up backed against the kitchen table, the edge digging into the backs of his thighs. Even then, Charlie didn’t let up his assault, slotting himself between Harvey’s legs and pulling their hips together with a rough arm around his back. Harvey gasped into the kiss, and Charlie pulled back just a little, something dark and possessive in his eyes.

“I didn’t *like* how she *looked* at you,” he growled, punctuating his words with rolls of his hips; Harvey was glad he wasn’t the only one hopelessly aroused, he felt as though he would burst into flames. “Only *I* get to look at you like that. You’re *mine.”*

“I am, ah, I am,” Harvey panted, fingers scrabbling for purchase on the edge of the table. Charlie pushed fingers into Harvey’s hair and tugged his head down, none too gently; his gaze bore into Harvey like a physical touch.

“Say it,” he ordered, “tell me.”

“I’m—I’m yours,” Harvey managed, and was rewarded by Charlie opening his pants and pressing a palm hotly against his straining erection, “Yoba! I’m all yours, Charlie, *please.”*

All at once, Charlie seized him by the hips and flipped him around so he was facing the table, then pressed firmly on the small of his back. Harvey complied immediately, bending forward so his top half lay across the tabletop. His heart was pounding so hard, he was surprised it wasn’t audible against the wood. Charlie bent over him, every inch of their bodies pressed together, and put his lips to Harvey’s ear.

“I only want this if you do,” he whispered, and there was the Charlie he knew, sweet and attentive even at his most feral. “Tell me.” Harvey nodded wildly, his glasses skewing off his face.

“I want it,” he rasped, his throat gone dry. “So much.” Charlie nipped at his ear in response, earning a jolt of surprise from Harvey, before drawing back completely. Harvey whined at the loss of contact, but he didn’t have long to wait; in the next breath Charlie had seized the back of his pants and yanked them down, boxers and all, right to the floor. He grabbed Harvey’s ankle and pulled it up, shoving his pants away to puddle around his other leg. Harvey was left bare from the waist down, shivering with anticipation and nerves. He felt Charlie’s leg push in between his own, kicking his ankles apart *just* a little roughly, and then a swish of fabric as —wait—was Charlie getting to his knees? Wasn’t he going to fuck Harvey, what was he—

Oh. Fuck.

The moment Harvey felt those strong hands on his ass, spreading him open, he understood what was about to happen. Charlie’s hot breath ghosted over his hole and he dropped his

forehead to the table, willing himself not to make a total fool of himself by coming three seconds in. It was something he absolutely loved but had no idea how to ask for, or if it was something he even *should* ask for; he'd always hoped he might get to do it to Charlie someday, but had never had any expectation that Charlie would want to do it to *him*. But now Charlie dove in like a starving man at a feast, licking and sucking as though he'd never wanted anything more. Harvey let out an absolutely inhuman noise, clutching at his own hair for lack of anything else to hold on to. He briefly felt Charlie grin against him, pleased with himself, before getting back to work: alternating between broad, wet licks and pointed thrusts, working Harvey's body inexorably open.

Harvey panted against the table, trying to stifle the keening noises Charlie was wringing out of him. He pulled his arms underneath him and covered his mouth, embarrassed, but instantly Charlie reached up and tugged his wrist away.

"No," he ordered, in that same growling voice. "If you want this, you have to let it out. Let me hear what I'm doing to you."

"O—okay," Harvey managed, shaky, just above a whisper. Charlie returned his hands to Harvey's ass, spreading it again, kneading.

"You want it?"

"Yes," Harvey breathed, his hips unconsciously pressing backward.

"I didn't hear that," Charlie said, his commanding tone at odds with the smile Harvey could feel against his skin. "Do you *want* it?"

He punctuated this with a swirl of his tongue against Harvey's hole, and Harvey all but screamed his response, *"Yes!"*

"Good boy," Charlie remarked, and dove back in. Harvey felt delirious, as though he were about to fall over even while he was bent over the table. Charlie's tongue flicked and thrust, it was too much, it wasn't nearly enough, he needed *more, deeper,* he needed Charlie to touch his cock—

He felt the tip of Charlie's tongue curl up, seeking, impossibly far inside him, and saw white spots burst across his vision. "Fuck, Charlie, I can't, I need—let me come—"

"No," Charlie barked again, pulling back and wrapping a hand roughly around the base of Harvey's cock. He squeezed, keeping his orgasm at bay, and Harvey nearly sobbed with need. "You're going to come around my dick. Aren't you?"

Harvey let out a strangled noise, too far gone to form words, and Charlie seemed to understand how overwhelmed he was; he stood, leaning over Harvey again to kiss down the back of his neck. "Shh," he murmured into his skin, "hey, it's up to you. I can make you come right now, or I can fuck you into this table. What do you want, baby?"

Shit. When he put it that way…Harvey gritted his teeth, thumping his forehead against the table, and tried to take deep breaths through his nose. "Fuck me," he whispered, praying

Charlie wouldn't ask him to repeat himself this time. "Please fuck me, but oh, Yoba, do it *now."*

"Two seconds," Charlie said, and then he was up and sprinting across the house, Harvey assumed in search of supplies. His aching cock twitched, and he wondered if he could get away with stroking himself, just a little bit. As he considered it, Charlie shouted back from the bedroom, "Don't touch!"

Harvey slumped against the table, sighing.

It wasn't two seconds, but Charlie was back before Harvey had a chance to get really impatient. He must have slicked his fingers on the way, because the moment Harvey felt Charlie's body heat return to his skin, two of those fingers were slipping easily inside him. He jumped, startled, and Charlie soothed him with a gentle hand stroking up his spine. "Now," Charlie murmured, leaning down close to his ear again, "I think you need a reminder of who gets to touch you."

Harvey really didn't, he was perfectly clear on that point, but he was also perfectly certain he wanted Charlie to fuck him into next week. "Yes, please," he agreed, trying to keep himself from grinding his hips back onto Charlie's hand. Charlie added a third finger, and Harvey nearly whimpered. "Yoba, Charlie, come on—"

"Soon," Charlie growled, low in his ear. Just the sound of it sent shivers through Harvey's entire overwrought body. "Soon I'm going to fuck you until you can't walk straight. I'm going to make you come all over this table, and then I'm going to come inside you, so deep you still feel me there next time some pretty young thing tries to make a move on *my* husband."

"Please!" Harvey begged, all self-control gone. In one swift movement, Charlie pulled out his fingers, straightened his spine, and buried himself deep in Harvey's body. Harvey let out a broken noise, bracing his palms against the table, and Charlie made good on his word: he seized Harvey's hips and pounded away at him, mercilessly hard and fast. It was almost never like this, not when Charlie was topping, at least. It was always incredible, but he treated Harvey so sweetly, so gently. Harvey wasn't sure if it was normal, to want to be marked and claimed and *possessed* this much, but he found he didn't much care.

He couldn't last. He wanted to, but Charlie was fucking him so hard the table had begun skidding across the floor, and he felt the heat building low in his spine. Part of him wanted to call out a warning, but part of him worried Charlie would stop him again. In the end, his brain lost control of his mouth, and he started babbling anyway. "Charlie, Charlie, oh god, I'm coming—"

To his intense relief, Charlie wrapped a hand around his cock, but only to help him along. "That's it," Charlie growled, bent over Harvey's body. "Let me see you, come for me."

Harvey did, spine arching off the table and hips thrusting backward. He felt it everywhere at once: Charlie's rough hand on his dick, his insides clutching around Charlie's erection, Charlie's fingers digging bruises into his hips. The relief flooded through him, wiping out every coherent thought, as he cried out wordlessly. Before he could ask Charlie what he

wanted—before the aftershocks had even subsided—Charlie swore, pulled Harvey's hips tight against his, and came with a long groan. True to his word, he filled Harvey as deeply as he could; Harvey hoped he would feel it for days.

Harvey's legs were reaching the end of their endurance. Being pressed that hard against the table hadn't done his circulation any favors, and while he didn't want Charlie to stop touching him, he wasn't sure he could support himself much longer. Fortunately, Charlie noticed the shaking of his knees. Without a word, he gently pulled out of Harvey, turned him around, and picked him up around the waist. Harvey let out a bark of laughter, his legs coming up to wrap around Charlie's hips.

"I think I can probably walk," he protested weakly, as Charlie began carrying him off to the bedroom. "Can you even see where you're going?"

"I think I can find my way to my own bed," Charlie huffed, but there was a smile on his face. Sure enough, he walked until his knees hit the edge of the mattress, then released Harvey onto it. He winked smugly, disappearing into the bathroom. "One sec."

Harvey lay there in a pleasant stupor, wondering if it was acceptable to go to sleep before the sun went down, until Charlie returned. His husband cleaned him gently with a damp cloth, then unbuttoned his shirt and helped him out of it. He climbed into bed beside Harvey, gathering him into his arms and nosing the hair at his temple. Harvey turned his head, and they slid into a long, slow kiss. Charlie tasted minty; he must've brushed his teeth while getting the cloth. They stayed like this for a long moment, not speaking, just holding each other and basking in the afterglow.

"So," Charlie began at last. "It seemed like you liked that?"

"Which 'that' do you mean?" Harvey asked, smiling with his eyes closed. It was embarrassing to talk about these things, but somehow less so right after a spectacular orgasm. "The 'that' where you got all possessive and bent me over a table? Or the 'that' where you put your tongue inside me?"

"Um. Either?"

"Both," Harvey assured him firmly. He opened his eyes to see Charlie looking pink and pleased with himself. But something needed to be said. "You do know there was never any danger, right? With that woman. For a number of reasons."

"I know."

"Because leaving aside the fact that she was, you know, not my preferred gender— *and* a patient—I'm totally ruined for anyone else, Char. All I see is you."

A wide, dizzying smile unfurled across Charlie's face, and Harvey mentally filed it away in his list of favorites. "I wasn't worried. I promise. I just...I don't know. Watching her flirt with you like that, like you were something she could just pick up for a night or two, it made me...well. Not jealous, not really. But I had this feeling of *uh-uh, no way, he's* mine. I was surprised, how bad I wanted to pin you down and remind you."

They lapsed into silence for a long moment, contemplating this. Harvey felt those urges sometimes, too. Last year's Harvest Festival came to mind, when he'd shoved Charlie onto an exam table and sucked the orgasm out of him before marking him as his territory. He'd been a little embarrassed of his own ferocity, but knowing that he inspired the same possessiveness in Charlie made him feel tingly all over. It occurred to him that both of those scenarios had come about after the Fair, because of interactions with tourists. Should they stop letting tourists into town at all? Or should they invite them in more often?

"Well," Harvey sighed, deciding that an early bedtime was inevitable today. "I don't need a reminder, but feel free to pin me down anytime, sunflower."

"Will do, Number One."

Chapter End Notes

What's going on in the mines? Will Pelican Town ever have a Fair that doesn't inspire wildly possessive sex? Stay tuned for the answers to these questions and more!

Happy Easter (or Bunny Day, for my fellow Animal Crossing addicts). I hope you're having a lovely Sunday wherever you are. Not going to lie, it feels really strange to be in isolation instead of spending today with my (very large) family, but talking with all of you lovely people is helping make quarantine go faster :) Thanks again for reading!

Tomorrow: Charlie and Harvey learn the adoption process is a little more involved than they'd thought. Shane has a problem. Harvey travels for a conference, and a mopey Charlie entertains himself in the mines.

Chapter 25: Winter, Year 2

Chapter Summary

> Charlie and Harvey learn the adoption process is a little more involved than they'd thought. Shane has a problem. Harvey travels for a conference, and a mopey Charlie has to entertain himself.

Chapter Notes

> There aren't any major content warnings for this chapter, but I do want to let you know that we'll be touching on the (long and difficult) adoption process in several upcoming chapters. I don't think it's especially rough, but if you're at a point in your life where you're trying to have children and finding it difficult, some of this might hit a little close to home. It won't be the main focus of the story or anything, but just a heads up!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"Jesus," Charlie groaned, rubbing his hands over his face. His sleeves were rolled up, his elbows resting on the table, and he knew his hair was sticking up madly from the fifteen times he'd run a hand through it in frustration. The light over the kitchen table shone down on a sea of paperwork, piled and scattered over every inch of the wood. Across the table, Harvey dutifully scribbled away at a piece of paper. "I had no idea there would be so much *paperwork.* I feel like I've filled out the same thing fifteen times."

"You probably have," Harvey said distractedly, coming to the end of his page and flipping to another. "They're asking for a lot of stuff in triplicate."

Adoption: it turned out there was a lot more to it than calling an agency and getting on a list. They'd had a preliminary background check, which had gone fine, of course. Now they had to fill out eleventy billion papers and write a profile of themselves for the agency, and *then* someone would have to come out to the farm and make sure it was a suitable environment for a child, and *then* they would wait until the agency called them. Charlie held back the bulk of his whining, knowing he'd gotten the easier task. He only had to fill out facts on forms; Harvey was writing the profile, a prospect so nerve-wracking Charlie didn't even like thinking about it. It was like a dating profile on steroids. How did you convince somebody to give you their child?

It wasn't like they had nothing going for them, though. They were financially secure (more and more each month), the addition to the house was finished, the farm was a great environment for a kid, and they were both home all day. As far as Charlie could tell, there

were only three points against them: their age difference (he was maybe slightly too young, Harvey was just slightly on the old side, and everything would have seemed easier if they were both 35), their relatively new marriage, and the fact that there was no real, established school in Pelican Town. Still, Penny was an excellent teacher, and Charlie wasn't worried about that.

He was both nervous about, and looking forward to, the home visit. Nervous, because objectively it was a scary prospect: a total stranger was going to come, spend an hour looking over their life, and judge whether they could be parents or not. But on the other hand, he felt way more confident about their ability to be charming in person. The farm was beautiful, as was the brand-new kids' room, and while he was almost certainly biased, he thought he and Harvey were pretty damn cute together. He was going to make sure to lock Pizza in the coop, though. In fact, maybe Pizza needed to just vacate the premises.

"I think this is everything," Charlie said as he signed his last form. He shuffled through the mountain of papers on the table, double-checking that he hadn't left anything blank. Harvey had flipped onto yet another page, and Charlie was dying of curiosity. What could he even be *saying* about them for three...no...five pages of neat, small, hand-written script?

"I'm just about done, too, I think," Harvey said, leaning back and rubbing the bridge of his nose behind his glasses. "Maybe. I'll probably rewrite it a couple more times. Want to take a look?"

Charlie took the sheaf of papers from him, propping his elbows back on the table, and began to read.

Dear birth parents,

My name is Harvey, and I'm writing to you on behalf of myself and my husband, Charlie. We live in a small, peaceful village in Stardew Valley called Pelican Town, where we work as a doctor (me) and a farmer (Charlie). First, I'd like to thank you for taking the time to read our profile and consider us as potential parents for your child. We understand what a monumental decision this is, and wish you all the best in making your choice.

Second, I'll give you some background on the two of us. Charlie grew up in the suburbs of Zuzu City, where he was raised by both his parents. They were happily married until his father's passing. After obtaining his bachelor's degree in business, Charlie went back to school for an MBA. He had a successful career in business for several years, but ultimately decided that his heart lay elsewhere. Two years ago, he left Zuzu City and moved to Pelican Town, where he began the work of restoring his grandfather's farm. Today, the farm is thriving, financially successful, and beautiful—and Charlie is very happy in his work.

I was also raised in Zuzu City, although I was orphaned at a young age; my parents passed away in the First War. I attended the Mortimer Academy through high school, and completed my pre-med and medical degrees at the Ferngill University School of Medicine. I worked as a physician of family medicine in Zuzu City until seven years ago, when I moved to Pelican Town and became the village doctor here. I wanted to work in

a place where I was needed, and I found that in Pelican Town. It's very rewarding work, and I've come to think of this village as home.

With the introductions out of the way, I'd like to tell you a little about us. Charlie and I met the day after he moved to Pelican Town, and quickly became friends. Actually, to be honest, I was fairly smitten with him from the moment we met. (I think he took a little longer, but that's understandable. He's the one with all the charm.) Every day I find something new to love about him, and every day I feel luckier and more grateful that we found each other. I think, based on what he's told me, that he feels the same way. We were married last summer in a lovely ceremony in the town square, surrounded by the neighbors who have become our surrogate family.

Speaking of those neighbors: we are enveloped on all sides by the warmest, kindest group of people I have ever had the privilege to know. They surprise me every day with their generosity and heart, and I know they would treat our child equally wonderfully. There are several young children in Pelican Town right now, and whoever coined the phrase "it takes a village to raise a child," I think they meant this one. Everyone knows and loves the kids in our town, from the schoolteacher who takes them on daily walks and picnics, to the rancher who makes them fresh ice cream from her own cows' milk. I couldn't imagine a safer, more welcoming place to raise a child.

And our farm, in particular, would be a wonderful place for kids to grow up. We have a beautiful house that Charlie has worked hard to renovate, surrounded by fields of vegetables and flowers, a barn full of friendly animals, a chicken coop, a lake, a forest, and more. Our child would spend many happy hours outdoors, and since Charlie works on the farm every day (and so do I, five days a week), they would spend those hours with us. Our home is filled with books, music, laughter, and a very lovable dog named Bones. I truly think we can provide a uniquely rich and peaceful environment for a child.

As for Charlie and I: we love our life together, caring for our farm and our neighbors. Both of us feel incredibly lucky to have arrived where we are. The only thing that could bring us any more joy is a child of our own. Charlie grew up with a traditional family, and knows what it means to be part of one. I didn't—but because I have never had one, I believe I cherish the idea all the more. I can't go back in time and redo my upbringing with loving parents. But I can be a loving parent to a child who needs one. And so can Charlie, whose capacity for love and understanding amazes me daily.

So thank you for reading this, from the bottom of my heart. Whatever your decision, I appreciate you taking the time to get to know us a little. And know that, if you choose us, we will live every day as your child's parents with the utmost gratitude, joy, and love.

Thank you,

Harvey & Charlie

Charlie looked up from the last page, his vision blurring. "V—" he managed, but that was all he got out before he lurched up from his seat, rounded the table, and dropped into Harvey's lap. He wrapped his arms around his husband's neck, clinging to him. Harvey's arms went

around his waist, and he rocked back and forth gently, making gentle sounds Charlie couldn't quite hear clearly.

"Was it all right?" Harvey asked, and Charlie laughed wetly, brushing his hand over his eyes.

"Darlin'," he said, pulling back to look him in the face, "if that letter doesn't get us a baby, then I don't know what people are looking for. The coolest person alive, probably. David Bowie?"

"David Bowie died a while back, honey," Harvey said gently.

"Then they'll have to make do with us, I guess." Charlie kissed him, cradling his face in his hands. He knew the hard part was still coming—getting through the home visit, waiting for the call—but at this moment, he felt nothing but hope. A line from the letter came back to him, and he pulled away; Harvey made a little noise of dissatisfaction. "What did you mean, I'm the one with the charm? That letter was pretty damn charming."

"Ah, mine's more of a stealth charm," Harvey replied, winking. "You know. Throw them off the trail."

"I knew the shy thing was an act! I can't believe I'm just now hearing about this strategy."

"You've learned my dark secret. You're stuck with me now."

"That I am."

Three weeks later, an adoption agent arrived at their home for the visit. Charlie and Harvey stood on the porch, Harvey's arm around Charlie's shoulders, trying to look as though they hadn't been frantically rejecting every outfit they collectively owned ten minutes prior. What did you *wear* to something like this? Charlie didn't want to look overly formal, but he also didn't think the Rambo farming ensemble would go over well. In the end, they each independently put on the outfits they'd worn on their first date, breaking into slightly hysterical giggles at the sight of each other.

Objectively, Charlie thought, the visit went well. The agent was a soft-spoken, friendly-enough woman, who seemed to understand their nervousness and not be put off by it. She was complimentary of the house and the farm, though she was (to Charlie's mind) unnecessarily concerned by both the larger animals and the well. Charlie didn't tell her that he'd built the well walls extra-tall to avoid any more small creatures falling into it. He *did* tell her that all of their animals were one hundred percent sweet, which she seemed to believe after meeting them. Pizza had gone to visit his Uncle Shane for the day, so the visit to the coop was uneventful. She seemed impressed by the kids' room, which was large and already furnished; unsure of what age child they'd be adopting, Charlie had asked Robin to build both a crib and a toddler bed. Just outside the kids' room was another, smaller room, which they'd decided to use as a study. The walls were lined with their combined collection of books; Charlie thought it made them look literary and smart, or at least he hoped.

After the house tour, there was the interview, during which they sat together on the couch and she sat in an armchair opposite. Thinking back on it later, Charlie honestly couldn't remember a single response he'd given. He *did* remember that Harvey had done the heavy lifting, answering each of her questions in the most heartfelt (and only slightly nervous) way. When the agent at last closed her notepad and stood up, Charlie's heart leapt into his throat. Judging by the way Harvey's arm tightened around him, he wasn't alone.

"Well," the agent said, smiling at them as they stood, "I have to take my report back to my supervisor, but I don't anticipate any problems. This is a lovely home, and you two seem like you'd make great parents."

Charlie felt Harvey sway with relief, and quickly wrapped his own arm around his husband's waist; nobody needed to be falling over today. "That's fantastic," he said fervently, grinning. "Thank you so, so much."

"You don't know what this means to us," Harvey added, his voice mostly steady.

"Someone from the agency will call you to confirm your placement on the list soon, I'd imagine. After that, it's just waiting for a birth parent to choose you, or for a child without guardians to be surrendered into our care."

"Great. Wonderful. Um…" Charlie hesitated; he didn't want to ask any questions, feeling as though the whole thing might buckle if he pushed too hard, but he had to know. "I know it varies from case to case, obviously, but could you tell us about how long you think…?"

"Until you can bring home a baby?" Her expression was knowing; Charlie was sure she got this question all the time. "Well, of course it depends on a lot of things. You could get a call in two weeks. But the most common wait time these days is anywhere from two to seven years."

Charlie felt as though he'd been punched in the stomach. Two to seven *years?* Beside him, Harvey let out a sharp exhale; the hand on Charlie's shoulder began trembling. "Years?" he repeated numbly, glancing up the stairs toward their empty nursery. "I, um...wow, that's...a long time."

"It is," the agent agreed, tilting her head sympathetically. "There are a lot of parents waiting to adopt. But there's no guarantee you'll wait that long. Your letter was very compelling, and that helps. We'll certainly keep you posted."

Charlie disentangled himself from Harvey to show her out, thanking her for her time and making sure she got safely back on the road. When her car had disappeared down the gravel road toward town, he ducked back inside and returned to the living room. Harvey had sunk onto the edge of the couch, staring straight ahead at nothing.

"Baby," Charlie began tentatively, but Harvey cut him off.

"Seven *years,* Charlie."

"I know."

“That’s—I’d be—” Forty-six, he didn’t say, but Charlie knew what he was envisioning. Spending the next seven years waiting for a phone call; if they were lucky, going to their child’s college graduation at nearly seventy.

“You would be,” Charlie said firmly, “a great dad. At any age.”

“I didn’t think it would be so long,” Harvey said helplessly, and Charlie’s heart ached. He wanted to fix this, wanted to tell Harvey they could somehow bring home a baby in six months, but he couldn’t.

“It might not be. It probably *won’t* be.”

“It could be.”

“Yeah, it could.” Charlie knelt in front of him, taking both of his hands. “It could be seven years, or we could never get a call at all. Or it could be two weeks from now. I know how hard it is, darlin’, but all we can do is try. Get our names on the list, cross our fingers, and hope for the best.”

Harvey finally seemed to focus, looking directly into his eyes. “I’m sorry,” he said. “This is happening to you too, you shouldn’t have to comfort me.”

“We can comfort each other, okay? And anyway, we should try to be happy. This is *good* news, we’re getting approved. The hard part’s over, honey. Now we just have to be patient.”

“You’re right,” Harvey agreed, even though they both knew being patient was the hardest part of all.

* * * * *

Shane had a problem.

Well, Shane had lots of problems. But his biggest one wasn’t, currently, his depression or his alcoholism. Or the miserable state of his bank account. Or how out of shape he was. His biggest problem, at the moment, was improbably small: the tiny robot on his nightstand. It was about six inches tall, built like one of those old-school Jetsons robots, C-shaped metal hands and a little antenna. It functioned as Shane’s alarm clock; when he needed to get up for work, it chirped at him in a cheerful and increasingly loud tone. If he pushed its antenna, it shut up and let him snooze—but if he snoozed too long, or ignored its chirping, it would hop down onto his bed, stick out one of its cute little hands, and shock him. Not dangerously, not even that painfully, but with enough force to drive him out of bed and leave him wide awake. He couldn’t deny that it had been helpful; he’d only been late to work once in the past two weeks, a big enough change that even Morris had complimented him on it (which, honestly, made him want to start oversleeping again). Its functionality wasn’t the problem.

The problem was that every time he looked at it, he thought about who’d made it for him.

Maru and Shane had been sleeping together, usually a few times a week, since the night of Charlie and Harvey’s wedding. Sometimes they stayed in Harvey’s old apartment, sometimes

in Maru's bedroom (with Shane sneaking out before the sun rose and her parents came knocking). It was, he'd felt, the perfect arrangement: they would meet up after he got off work, have a late dinner together (usually just pizza or something else he'd stolen from Joja), and then fall into bed. Sometimes they'd spend some time hanging out while Maru worked on her inventions and Shane played video games. It was easy, casual, exactly the kind of thing he'd needed in his life. While Shane's depression wasn't magically cured, he was finding that the combined efforts of Maru, Charlie, therapy, and medication went a long way to keeping it under control. And most notably, he found himself looking forward to the next day, something he couldn't remember having felt for at least a decade or so.

But Shane's dumb brain couldn't seem to be contented for long, and sometime around Spirit's Eve—when Maru had shrieked with horrified laughter in the haunted maze, leaping backward from a grasping zombie hand and wrapping her arms around Shane's waist as though it were perfectly natural—it had started asking him dumb questions. Like what kind of flowers Maru might like. Or how he could make a compelling case that they maybe not sleep with any other people. Or how her voice might sound saying the word *boyfriend,* as in —just as an example—"this is Shane, my boyfriend."

It was objectively ridiculous. He knew this. Maru was young, beautiful, and brilliant, so bright with promise and potential it almost hurt to look at her. Though she didn't seem to have decided where yet, she was obviously going places. The very last thing she needed, or probably wanted, was a thirty-year-old boyfriend with a minimum wage job and a history of addiction. He didn't deserve her, but it didn't stop him from wanting.

Sometimes he wondered if he *could* deserve her. Maybe, with enough effort, he could make himself into someone she would seriously consider dating. He could start working out, try extra hard in his therapy sessions, even start taking online classes again. For a long moment, lying in bed and staring at his silent little robot, Shane considered this fit, happy, accomplished version of himself. Perfect: all he had to do was become an entirely different person. Piece of cake.

Briefly, he considered talking to Charlie. He was a good friend; he would understand, he would try to help. But then, judging by his stories, it seemed like Charlie had more or less gotten everybody he'd ever set his sights on. Maybe he wasn't the person to talk to about the fear of rejection. He thought of a different conversation, over a year ago, a pathetic loser dropping into his booth at the Stardrop and nervously asking for advice. Maybe the person he needed to talk to was *Harvey.*

Or, maybe, Harvey would figure out that they'd been having sex in his apartment and kick Shane into next week. It seemed unlikely, but Harvey was awfully protective of Maru, and he'd been getting in better shape since starting work on the farm. Anything was possible.

The little robot chirped and hopped, insisting that Shane get out of bed; he shot a hand out and bopped it on the head before it could start getting really loud. Great. He'd lost an hour of time he could have spent sleeping, and all he had to show for it were three conclusions: feelings were bullshit, talking was pointless, and he was a coward. Helpful.

Oh well. He'd see Maru that night, at her place. And if he really wanted to stay all night—if he was almost as interested in actually *sleeping with her* as he was in sleeping with her—

well, he was just going to have to keep it to himself.

* * * * *

"Well," Harvey said, suitcase in hand, and gestured listlessly at the train that stood waiting behind him. "Time to go, I guess."

"Looks like it." Neither one of them moved.

Charlie was being stupid, and he knew it. To keep the clinic running, Harvey needed to renew his medical license, and to do that, he needed continuing education hours. The easiest way for him to get them was by going to this conference at the Capitol and attending a bunch of seminars over the next week. Charlie knew, objectively, this was a very short amount of time, nothing in the scheme of things. But he and Harvey hadn't spent one single day apart since that horrible week the previous spring, and it turned out Charlie wasn't super excited to break that streak. He wished the conference could at least happen in summer, when he was busy enough to keep his mind off how codependent and pathetic he was.

But, because the gods of medicine were vindictive (did medicine have gods? Did Hippocrates count?), it was happening two weeks before the Feast of the Winter Star. And so Charlie had gotten up before the sun this morning, strapping Harvey's suitcase to the rack of his bike and pedaling the two of them to the train station.

"I wish I could go with you," Charlie said, not for the first time. Harvey quirked a small, unhappy smile.

"Me, too." He couldn't, of course. The animals needed him, and anyway Harvey would be tied up in seminars all day; there was no point in Charlie clinging to his suitcase like a barnacle. He could be enough of a functional adult to make it on his own for seven days.

"I really should go," Harvey said softly, his hand on Charlie's jaw. He leaned down to kiss him, very gently, and then his warmth was moving up and away. Charlie nodded, giving his wrist a squeeze as it left his face.

"Safe travels. I'll see you soon."

Harvey turned, stepping up onto the train, and Charlie waited to see him off. Before the doors had a chance to close, though, Harvey dropped his suitcase, clambered back down the steps, and wrapped Charlie up in a rib-cracking hug. Charlie returned it, baffled but clinging like the barnacle he was.

"This is ridiculous," Harvey laughed, his face in Charlie's hair. "It's only a week."

"I know. I hate it too." Charlie pulled back, both hands on Harvey's face, and kissed him more thoroughly; long before he was finished, the train let out a scolding *hoot* of impatience.

"All right, all right. I *really* have to go now." Harvey released Charlie, stepping backwards and up onto the steps with an expression of deep reluctance. "I love you."

"Love you too, V."

“Bye, sunflower.”

As bad as the train platform had been, the farmhouse was a million times worse. Charlie had never thought of Harvey as a particularly noisy housemate, but the deafening silence when he stepped inside said otherwise: nobody bustling around making coffee, no quiet jazz strains filtering in from Harvey’s little room, no pens scratching across medical charts. Without even removing his coat or boots, Charlie turned right back around and went to the barn.

Here, at least, there was noise. The animals crowded around him, still waking up but hopeful for a treat. Electra tugged at his coat while Goose and Belle butted their heads gently against him; Louie ran in excited circles around his knees, bleating. Even in his mopey state, Charlie couldn’t help but smile. He wasn’t totally alone, anyway.

“All right, guys. Let’s get you fed.”

It turned out that after the animals were all fed and the chickens’ eggs were collected, there really wasn’t that much to *do* on the farm in winter. In a few days, there would be wine to bottle, and Charlie almost found himself looking forward to the long, tedious process. But for now, determined not to sit around pining like a Victorian damsel, he picked up his sword and pickaxe. The mines were always a good way to kill far, far more time than he’d intended. (In fact, this was one of the very few sources of friction in his marriage; every once in a while, he lost track of time down there, and Harvey worried about him.)

The weird feeling he’d gotten in the mines that one day hadn’t dissipated. If anything, it had actually gotten stronger—but Charlie knew his attraction to danger was bordering on an addiction, and so like a recovering addict, he kept a close eye on his impulses. Surely he didn’t need to actually stop *going* into the mines, right? As long as he ignored that seductive pull, only digging down as far as he could handle, everything would be fine. Yes, *technically* it was about a hundred and ten degrees down there and it seemed like everything wanted to murder him, but he’d made it this far, hadn’t he?

Charlie had lost count of what floor he was on, but it was somewhere near the one hundred mark, he was pretty sure. There was a shitty, terrifyingly rickety elevator that stopped every five floors, but weirdly, the doors had rusted shut at every stop; Charlie had to reach them by ladder first, then pry them open with his pickaxe from the outside, before he could use the elevator to get to that level. This floor was just as sweltering and lava-streaked as the rest of them, and infested with little nightmare crabs that looked like rocks until he got within pinching distance. Once Charlie was fairly confident he’d dispatched them all (were they edible? He packed up some of the meat just in case; he could ask Marlon), he took a swing at a few promising-looking rocks with his pickaxe. The first four splintered into nothing but stone, but on the fifth he struck—

“No way,” he said in an undertone, lifting the gleaming nugget up to the light. Granted, Charlie had no idea how you could tell gold from any other yellowish metal, but it *looked* like gold? To Charlie’s mind, there was less regret in “filled my backpack with what turned

out to be pyrite" than "left a shitload of what might have been gold in the mines," so he got to work.

"I'm too busy to talk right now, Charlie," Clint said shortly, pounding away at something with a hammer at his forge. The man glowed as beet-red as those weird rock crabs, sweating and swearing as he worked.

"But I think—"

"Seriously, really busy."

Well, fuck you too, Charlie thought, and rather than keep wasting his breath, he dumped the contents of his backpack on the concrete floor. Clint whipped his head around at the clattering sound, looking outraged, but when he saw the sizable pile there his annoyance seemed to die in his throat.

"Is that—"

"Yeah." Charlie still didn't know, really, but he suddenly found he didn't mind wasting Clint's time, if he was going to be such a dick about it. "But I can take it to somebody else, if you're too busy."

He wasn't. (Which was good, because Charlie really *couldn't* take it to anyone else.)

The ore *was* gold. This was objectively good news, though Charlie was put out to learn that gold was less valuable in Stardew Valley than elsewhere, because apparently there was an *even more precious* metal kicking around in the mines. "Iridium is one of the strongest and most beautiful metals on earth," Clint explained, examining a lump of Charlie's gold under his loupe. "Find some of *that,* and you'll never have to work again."

But I like working, Charlie didn't say. He thought it might be just a little insensitive, since Clint openly hated his job. "What should I do with all this?"

"I'll buy some, if you're selling. Can't buy all of it, but you could send the rest off with Lewis." A shrewd look came over his face, which instantly made Charlie suspicious. "You'd have an easier time selling it in bars. I could smelt them for you if you let me keep, oh...twenty-five percent?"

"Clint. I'm not an idiot."

But Charlie *was* lazy, or at least totally uninterested in DIY smelting, and so he handed off his gold to Clint with a handshake agreement to let the blacksmith keep five percent. Given that Charlie had absolutely no idea what the going price of gold was, it didn't pain him as much as it might have otherwise. He pedaled home in the frigid dark with a grin on his face, already excited to tell Harvey when he called. Thank God they'd gotten a phone.

But when he arrived home, he found the answering machine blinking judgmentally at him, a 1 displayed on its little screen. Charlie played the message as he stripped off his sweat-

soaked clothes, his heart squeezing at the sound of Harvey's voice. *"Hi, honey,"* his husband said, and Charlie could hear him puttering around his hotel room in the background. *"Thought I might catch you, but I guess you're out somewhere. I made it here safe and got all checked in. The room is nice, although it would be nicer if we were sharing it.*

"I hope you're having a good evening, wherever you are. I'm pretty worn out from the trip, so I'm heading to bed. But I'll catch up with you tomorrow. Say hi to the animals for me, okay? I love you, Char. Good night."

Well, shit. Once again, Charlie's dallying in the mines had cost him time with Harvey. He thought his husband would forgive him, though—especially once he saw how much Charlie had earned from today's expedition. Their future child was going to need a college fund, after all. And braces, maybe, and clothes, and summer camps, and actually Charlie should probably just go back down there and dig up as much gold as he could get his hands on? But that was for another day. For the moment, Charlie needed to shower and make dinner, then flop into bed. And if he made himself a stand-in husband out of pillows just so he could have something to cuddle with, well, that was nobody's business but his own.

Charlie cursed Pelican Town's total lack of cell service many, many times over the following days. It was funny, he'd never minded the lack of a portable phone until Harvey had gone away, but now it was driving him nuts. Having to be *in your house* when someone called: it was barbaric, honestly. And no text messages! How was a person meant to carry on a long-distance relationship under these conditions? He and Harvey played an excruciating game of phone tag for days, each calling and leaving messages while the other was busy.

"Sorry I missed you, V. I was down in the mines and didn't realize what time it was. Call me back tomorrow, OK? I should be in the house most of the day."

"Ah, I was hoping to call earlier, but some old acquaintances from med school caught up with me, and we went out to dinner. Don't worry. None of them are anywhere near as handsome as you. Good night, my love."

"I thought I'd be in the house last night, but Goose must've eaten something weird and, well, let's just say the floor of the barn needed a serious scrub. Immediately. We'll definitely talk tomorrow."

On it went, for four horrible days. It reminded Charlie in some ways of that summer when they'd written each other letters, but that had felt different; he'd *expected* to be taking turns speaking, not trying and failing to reach each other at the same time. Harvey had apparently spent a few more evenings with his med school friends, which actually made Charlie really happy—he'd been under the impression that Harvey had lost contact with everyone after his nuclear-level breakup—but also meant less time for phone calls. Charlie thought of his own old friends, the Joja crew he'd run around with in Zuzu City. Occasionally he felt vaguely guilty for having dropped off the face of the earth so thoroughly, but honestly, they'd kind of been dicks about the farming thing. Misha and Sara had outright laughed at him, and Jordan had given him the kind of patronizing encouragement you'd give a child who wanted to be a superhero. He knew they hadn't expected him to last long in Pelican Town, and so he hadn't

particularly wanted to expend the effort to keep up with them. Certainly not enough to write *actual paper letters,* which was his main form of communication with the world outside Pelican Town. He felt so much more affection for his neighbors; he didn't really miss them.

So, without conversations with Harvey to occupy him, Charlie found other ways to pass the time. Every day, he did his farm chores—feeding and grooming the animals, collecting eggs, checking on the wine—and then came back inside for lunch. After cleaning up, he either went to the mine, or ran errands until Shane got off work. The optimist in Charlie had been looking forward to at least spending some more time with Shane (who had been oddly busy lately), and for a few days, he did. They picked up pizza and played video games in Shane's room, and Shane listened semi-patiently while Charlie brought up his absentee husband at every flimsy opportunity.

"Harvey would probably know what kind of plane that was," he sighed, as Shane's character hijacked an aircraft to escape a mob. Shane scowled, wrestling with the controls.

"Yeah? Would he know how to fucking land it?"

"Probably."

"Well then I miss him, too."

Charlie spent some time with other friends, too. He brought an interesting-looking piece of driftwood to Leah and kept her company while she worked; he lurked around the clinic while Maru was there, discussing her latest inventions; and at one point, curious about a strangely-shaped rock he'd found in the mines that neither Clint nor Gunther could identify, he climbed the ladder down to the sewers and visited Krobus. (The Shadow Brute took the rock from him, turning it over in his hands. He examined it thoroughly before solemnly declaring, "This is a rock.")

On the fifth day since Harvey's departure—and the first snowy day of the season—Charlie rounded the corner of Marnie's house just as Shane was getting home from work. "Oh, hey!" he called, but to his confusion Shane hurried up, making a beeline for the door.

"No," he said flatly. "Nuh-uh."

"What?" Charlie asked blankly, slowing to a stop on the path. Shane heaved a full-body sigh, glaring at him over his shoulder.

"Listen, farm boy," he said in an aggrieved tone, "no offense, but I've got my own shit to do tonight, and your pining is driving me kinda nuts. Go bug someone else."

Charlie's mouth dropped open. "Seriously? You're kicking me out?"

"I seriously am. Go away and call your husband."

"You're the worst," Charlie called after him, but he'd already gone inside. *Rude.* Well, Charlie didn't need him; he had other friends. Turning to the south, he marched through the

snow to Leah's cabin, raising a hand to knock on the door right as it opened. Leah stood just inside, wearing a coat and looking startled.

"Oh! Charlie! I'm sorry, did you need something?"

"Just wondered how your sculpture was coming," he said, smiling. "Want to hang out for a while?"

"Ah, I'm sorry, I'm actually just headed to Elliott's."

Charlie was pitiful and lonely, but he wasn't an idiot; the unspoken *and you're not invited* rang loud and clear. "Got it," he replied. "Next time, then. Have a good night!"

It turned out all of Pelican Town was apparently busy: Maru was nowhere to be found, Gus had his hands full with a loudly intoxicated Pam, and most everyone else seemed to be hibernating. Out of desperation, Charlie headed back down to visit Krobus, but even *he* was missing; a crudely-lettered sign reading "SHOP CLOSED" was the only sign of him. Feeling defeated and a little bit sorry for himself, Charlie trudged home.

"Enough, Charles," Charlie said out loud, lying flat on his back on the bed with a cuddly Bones. The dog lay with his head on Charlie's stomach, eyes closed as Charlie's fingers stroked idly through his fur. Charlie sighed, staring up at the ceiling, and wondered for the thousandth time what was wrong with him. He would never, not in a million years, have imagined himself the type of person to mope like this when their partner went away for a few days. So why couldn't he shake it off?

He thought he knew, actually, if he was honest with himself. Though he'd been farming for almost two years at this point, in some ways his life in Pelican Town still felt like a dream. He saw the same friendly faces every day, almost a cast of characters: the grocer, the bartender, the carpenter. He got up and took care of animals, harvested crops, put it all in a box and waited for money to arrive overnight. He spent almost every waking moment with Harvey, who after two years he *still* couldn't believe he'd had the luck to find. And now that Harvey had left, it felt like a deviation from the script, an indicator that his old life was still lurking out there somewhere. Pelican Town was a lovely little bubble, but it wasn't the whole world, even if it was sometimes easier to convince himself that it was.

And of course, he also just really, really missed Harvey.

Suddenly, as though summoned by his train of thought, the phone rang. Charlie sat bolt upright, wincing at the sudden head rush as he ran to the other room. He snatched up the receiver with both hands, almost fumbling it in his haste to get it against his ear. "Hello?"

"Charlie!" Charlie actually closed his eyes for a moment, overcome with relief at finally hearing Harvey's voice again. He knew it was ridiculous to get so emotional after just five days, but he couldn't help it. "Oh, honey. I finally caught you."

"Phones are the fucking *worst,"* Charlie snarled passionately, and Harvey laughed.

“I don’t know about that. We’d have to wait two more days to talk without them.”

“I guess you’ve got a point.” Charlie sank down onto the couch, tucking his feet up against the armrest. “How have you been, darlin’? How’s the conference?”

“Honestly? I’m dying of boredom,” Harvey replied. “Sitting in these damned lectures is killing me. I’ve lost my patience for sitting still since I started working on the farm, I think.”

“Sorry you’re not enjoying it.” He wasn’t, really. Or, well, he *was* sorry that Harvey was having a bad time, but he wasn’t sorry that he was the only miserable one.

“Eh, it’s almost over. What about you? What have you been up to?”

Charlie worked hard to keep the smugness out of his voice. “Well...striking gold, for one,” he said, smugly. Oops.

“Gold? As in, *literal gold?”*

Charlie filled his flabbergasted husband in on his latest adventures, leaving out a few things here and there. He didn’t mention that there was lava streaming down the walls of his latest floors, or that the monsters had gotten much tougher and more numerous. He didn’t mention his visit to Krobus, either, remembering that Harvey had recommended he stay away from supernatural creatures. Honestly, none of it was that important for Harvey to know. The point was that he’d been making lucrative finds down there; the rest was just detail, right?

Harvey, in turn, told Charlie about his week in the Capitol thus far: the most interesting lectures, running into his old school friends, going out for dinner and drinks with them. “I wish you were here for me to show off,” Harvey said. “I showed them our wedding photos, but I still don’t think Rebecca believes I managed to snag someone as good-looking as you.”

“Rebecca is welcome to come down here and see for herself. I’m happy to provide as much PDA as it takes to convince her.”

Harvey laughed, but it trailed off quickly, and they were silent for a long moment. “Can I tell you something?” he asked quietly. Charlie felt a little spike of unease.

“Yeah, of course. What’’s up?”

“I know it’s only been a few days, but...I really miss you.” Safe in the solitude of the room, Charlie pumped a victorious fist in the air; he wasn’t alone in his feelings. “I want to come home.”

“Thank God,” Charlie sighed, letting his eyes drift shut. “I’ve been going crazy.”

“Is it bad, do you think? That we’re so…”

“Clingy?” Charlie supplied, and Harvey made a noise of assent. “I wondered that too. I think we’re still supposed to be in the ‘honeymoon phase,’ though. Or at least that’s the excuse I’m using.”

“I know everybody probably feels this way in the beginning, but I can’t imagine ever getting out of the honeymoon phase with you. I still want you all the time.”

Charlie flopped backward on the couch, grinning. “It’s mutual, I promise. Get back here and I’ll show you how much.”

Harvey sighed, a thousand miles away. “Don’t take this the wrong way, but I need a change of subject,” he said regretfully. “Otherwise I’m going to have to ask you exactly *what* you’ll show me, and these walls are far too thin for phone sex.”

“Well, that’s a shame.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you all so much for the lovely comments! It's been the highlight of my day, reading them and chatting with you.

I know I try to keep a lot of things canon, but I just couldn't hang with the "decide to adopt a baby, bring home a baby almost immediately" thing from the game. Even if you scale it up the way I scaled up the seasons for the story, it's only six weeks. But! The paperwork's done! Now they just have to wait, and maybe stop making ill-advised trips into the mines.

Tomorrow: Harvey runs into travel difficulties. Shane is oddly nervous about Winter Star. On the first day of spring, Charlie makes a mistake.

Chapter 26: Winter, Year 2

Chapter Summary

Harvey runs into travel difficulties. Shane is oddly nervous about Winter Star. On the first day of spring, Charlie makes a mistake.

Chapter Notes

Some NSFW content in this chapter, just FYI!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harvey was beginning to remember why he didn't travel often: sometimes, traveling *sucked.* When he'd left his hotel room that morning, he'd felt buoyed by the knowledge that only two train rides and a short layover lay between him and Charlie. But his happiness had been short-lived; when he'd arrived at the station, he'd found his first train had been canceled.

"Technical difficulties," the gruff man at the ticket counter had explained, and jabbed a finger at the timetable on the window. "Next one leaves in three hours."

"But I'll miss my connection," Harvey protested weakly, knowing there was nothing to be done. The ticket agent shrugged, informed him that he could reschedule his connection when he reached Zuzu City, and shuffled away in search of coffee.

Three and a half hours of reading later (he'd started with his notes from the conference, but the boredom had proved too much, and he'd moved on to Charlie's comic books), he was finally on the way to Zuzu City. Of course, the ride would take four hours, and his train to Stardew Valley would depart in two. Harvey looked enviously around him at all the passengers on their cell phones, chattering away to the people back home. It was pointless to own one while living in Pelican Town, but it would have made his life much easier. He only hoped the station in Zuzu City would have a working pay phone; he couldn't remember, and he wanted to warn Charlie that he'd be late.

Of *course* the only pay phone in the Zuzu City station was broken; someone had jammed an oversized Gotoro quarter into the coin slot, and it wouldn't budge. In desperation, he tried asking three separate people if they would let him buy them a cup of coffee in exchange for using their phone, but all three declined before shuffling away. His social anxiety wouldn't let him try a fourth, and the gate agent who processed his new connection wouldn't let him use

her phone, either. “If I let you use it, I have to let everyone use it,” she explained, in a tone of patently fake cheer.

“Okay. Thank you.” Harvey was never sure why he thanked people who hadn’t helped him, but he didn’t seem able to break the habit. Picking his suitcase back up, he examined his ticket, and his eyes nearly fell out of his head. “Wait! This doesn’t leave for another six hours!”

“Yes, that’s correct. Trains only run between this station and Stardew Valley twice a day. It’s a very small station,” she added helpfully, as though Harvey hadn’t been there.

“Please, can I *please* use your phone,” he begged, his patience fraying. “My husband was expecting me home an hour ago. He’ll be worried.”

“I’m sorry. It’s policy.”

Harvey stalked away without another word; apparently it *wasn’t* too late to break the habit. He scanned the rows of seats for a place to sit down, but evidently the delays had displaced a lot of people, and every chair was occupied. Sighing, he plunked down onto the floor in the corner, leaning against his suitcase. Assuming his next train left on time, he’d reach home a full *nine hours* after Charlie had been expecting him; if only Pelican Town’s train station were large enough to have a station agent, or even a departure board, to update Charlie on the delays. He thought longingly of the afternoon he’d planned, taking a nap in his own bed, waking up to have dinner with Charlie and then taking each other apart for hours. Instead, he could doze uncomfortably in this grimy corner, eat train station pizza, and walk home alone in the middle of the night.

It was unbearable to be this close to Charlie and still have to wait. They hadn’t been able to speak on the phone again since two nights ago, and he missed him with every molecule in his body. And it wasn’t just Charlie, either; he missed the animals, Bones, the house. He felt like a magnet, the pull toward home increasing maddeningly the closer he got to it. But as frustrating as it was, Harvey felt an odd satisfaction at having something to miss. The last time he’d gone to this conference had been eight years ago, just on the tail end of his relationship with Philip, and he’d felt nothing but resignation about going home afterward. It was a nice change, this desperation to get home and resume his life. On that happier note, Harvey let himself doze off for the long wait.

Pelican Town was *freezing.* It felt like the temperature had dropped by at least twenty degrees during the week Harvey had been away. Then again, arriving just before midnight didn’t exactly assure a warm welcome, in any sense of the word. He stood on the platform, shivering, and tried to psych himself up for the walk to the farm. *Just another couple of miles, and then you’ll be home. Another few miles, and you’ll see—*

Charlie, he’d been about to think, but his thoughts were derailed by the sight of a familiar bicycle leaning against a lamppost. It couldn’t be—Harvey was nine hours late, surely that wasn’t—

“V!” called a familiar voice, and Harvey’s face broke into a helpless grin before he’d even turned around. When he did, the sight was so welcome he nearly melted into a puddle of relief right then and there: Charlie, bundled up against the cold, running toward him. Harvey took two long steps forward, reaching out, and then Charlie was flinging himself into his arms. His husband was a solid, comforting weight, erasing the stress of the day in an instant. Harvey tucked his face between Charlie’s scarf and his neck, just breathing him in.

“I missed you, sunflower,” he murmured, and Charlie’s arms tightened around his shoulders.

“I’m so glad you’re home.”

Suddenly, Harvey remembered why he’d been so surprised to see Charlie at the station, and pulled back enough to look at him. “How are you here? I was supposed to be here hours ago! I’m sorry I couldn’t reach you, I tried, but I couldn’t get my hands on a phone.”

“That’s okay. I did.” Charlie smiled up at him, looking as ridiculously besotted as Harvey felt, and Harvey had to resist the urge to kiss him mid-explanation. “When you weren’t on the train this afternoon, I called the station in Zuzu City and found out about the delays. The lady on the phone was pretty unhelpful,” he added darkly, and Harvey laughed.

“I know what you mean.”

“You must be exhausted, darlin’. Let’s get you home.” Charlie picked up his suitcase, ignoring Harvey’s half-hearted protests, and headed for his bicycle. Suddenly, the miles between himself and home didn’t seem nearly as long.

Harvey had been looking forward to their reunion all week—for more reasons than one—but once they’d gotten home, stumbled inside with his luggage, greeted Bones, and peeled off their frozen outerwear, he found he was totally exhausted. He stripped off his clothes and fell into bed without even bothering to dig out his pajamas; Charlie did the same, and they nestled together under the blankets. Harvey let out a deep sigh of satisfaction at being back in Charlie’s arms, in their bed, and shifted to get more comfortable. But apparently his shifting was having an effect on Charlie; he glanced at his husband, who looked back sheepishly.

“I’m sorry,” he said, starting to roll away. “I know you’re too tired, it’s just been a while, it’ll go away in a few minutes.”

“Maybe I’m not too tired,” Harvey countered, trailing fingers up the inside of Charlie’s thigh. He’d thought he was, but his own body was reacting to Charlie’s naked, aroused proximity. Charlie let out a little gasp, dropping his head back on the pillow.

“Are you su— *ohhh.”* Harvey’s wandering hand had found its target, wrapping around Charlie’s erection, and he was suddenly much less exhausted than he’d been a moment ago. Charlie felt heavenly after a week apart, and after some consideration, he decided he needed to know if he tasted equally good. He extracted himself from Charlie’s arms, turning around and sliding down the bed to press kisses to the inside of his thigh. “Oh, fuck, yes *please.* Come here, shift over a little bit…”

After some arranging, they reached a mutually beneficial position, one where Harvey could slide Charlie's cock into his mouth while feeling Charlie swallow down his own. They rarely did it like this, and that was clearly a policy they were going to have to reexamine, because it was delightful: teasing Charlie's silky skin with his tongue, his dick surrounded by wet heat. Once upon a time, a week would have been a tiny blip on Harvey's radar, but it was the longest he and Charlie had gone without sex since their fight last spring. Between seven days of deprivation, Charlie's skilled tongue, and the pornographic sounds he was making between Harvey's legs, it wasn't going to take him long.

Wanting to get Charlie there too, he sucked him in as deep as he could, taking him down into his throat. He was rewarded with a desperate, needy whine from Charlie, whose hips twitched forward in search of even more. Charlie's gag reflex was stronger than Harvey's, but he more than made up for it with his tongue, which he swirled in some kind of wickedly complex motion Harvey was too far gone to decipher. He considered pulling off to warn Charlie of his impending orgasm, but he could see the signs of Charlie's own approaching—his cock going rock-hard, his balls drawing up tight—and decided it would be more polite to continue, all things considered. He settled for giving a long, warning moan, deep in his throat, and Charlie hummed eagerly as the release crashed over him like a wave. He spilled into Charlie's talented mouth, thrusting a little, unable to help himself. Just as the sensation started to become too much, Charlie broke away and cried out—"I'm coming, baby, coming, *fuck"*— and then Harvey lunged forward, burying Charlie's cock down his throat as he came.

Harvey wasn't sure how much time passed like that, with the two of them too sated and sleepy to move a muscle, but he must have drifted off; he felt himself being gently manhandled back in the other direction, a pillow and blanket magically appearing in their proper places. And then Charlie was cuddling up to him again, his front to Harvey's back, and kissing gently along his shoulder. Harvey smiled drowsily, eyes shut.

"You're a good husband," he managed, his voice coming out hoarse, and Charlie made a pained noise behind him.

"Says the man who lost his voice deep-throating me just now," he murmured, stroking a hand over Harvey's hip. "God, you sound incredible. We'd better go to sleep or I'm going to have to go again."

"In the morning," Harvey assured him. "Ask me again in eight hours."

"Maybe ten or twelve."

"Fine by me."

* * * * *

The Feast of the Winter Star was winding down, and Shane had never been so glad to have plates of food cleared away. It wasn't that he hadn't liked it. Gus had, as usual, killed it, and everything had been delicious; Shane especially loved the elaborate white cake Gus made only for this particular festival. But this year, he almost hadn't been able to choke his food down.

“What’s wrong with you?” Charlie demanded from across the table, through a mouthful of pie. “You barely ate anything. Are you sick?”

“Maybe just sick of watching the two of you make out at the table,” he retorted, just to be an asshole. Beside Charlie, Harvey turned bright pink, even though they hadn’t been doing anything of the kind. He threw a glance at Jas, clearing his throat.

“Might be a little inappropriate in front of…”

“I know what making out means,” Jas supplied helpfully. “We have TV.”

Harvey sighed, while Charlie made an elaborate show of coughing into a napkin to hide his laughter. Shane took the opportunity to look helpful for once, hopping up and stacking all their plates. Charlie’s laugh cut off with an indignant noise as Shane whisked away his pie.

“Hey! I wasn’t done eating that!”

“Sounded like you were done to me,” he tossed over his shoulder, carrying the plates to where Gus stood stacking them in tubs. As he crossed the square, he *very, very determinedly* did not look over at where Maru sat having dinner with her family. Yoba, they still had to get through all the fucking “secret friend” gifts before he could talk to her. He wasn’t going to survive.

Lost in his thoughts after depositing the plates, he hadn’t noticed Charlie sneaking up on him. The farmer appeared at his elbow, making him jump a mile. “Hey,” Charlie prompted, in the sincere kind of voice that meant *we’re going to have a Big Talk.* “Seriously, are you okay?”

“I’m fine. Go back to Dr. Boyfriend.”

“That’s Dr. *Husband* now, thank you,” Charlie corrected airily, and stayed where he was. “Are you...struggling?” He gestured to the bar table, littered with half-empty bottles of wine. “I can walk you home, if you need to get out of here.”

Shamefully, Shane was tempted for a second. Everyone knew about his drinking problem; it would have been easy to say yes, to deflect the personal questions and hide the real reason for his nerves. But the last thing he wanted was Charlie worrying about him relapsing. He sighed, thinking again how friends were both a blessing and a curse. “No, it’s—I’m fine, with that. I’m, okay, I’m gonna, um, ask someone a question. Kind of a big question. Well. For me, anyway.”

Charlie’s face lit up as though Shane had given him the best Winter Star gift he could imagine. “Oh my god!” he said, too loudly, and then dropped his voice to a hissing whisper at Shane’s panicked look. “Sorry! Oh my god! Shane! Are you going to ask someone out?”

“Shhhhh, pipe the fuck down! Yes, okay?”

“Oh my god!”

“Say oh my god *one* more time,” Shane growled, as menacingly as he could manage.

“Who is she?”

“Nope.”

Charlie looked deeply wounded, as though Shane had kicked his dog. “Come *on!* Don’t hold out on me, I’m your best friend!”

“Don’t *interrogate* me, I’m your best friend.”

“Shane…” Charlie was going to try whining now, apparently. Out of the corner of his eye, Shane saw Maru get up from her table and head their direction. He needed to cut off this line of inquiry, *fast.*

“Look,” he said in a rushed undertone, “I promise I’ll tell you everything, *if* she says yes. Okay? Everything.”

“But—”

“Take it or leave it.”

Charlie gave an aggrieved sigh, throwing his hands up. *“Fine,”* he grumbled. “Fine. But I’m going to hold you to that.”

“You do that,” Shane said, and gave him a none-too-gentle shove in the direction of his (extremely, endlessly patient) husband. “Yoba, you’re annoying. How you ever got that nice dude to marry you, I’ll never understand.”

“I have my good qualities,” Charlie said, with an unmistakably lecherous grin. Shane made a gagging noise, throwing his hands up as Charlie finally *(finally)* walked away. And not a moment too soon: Maru arrived to deposit her family’s plates, giving him a small smile.

“Having a good time?” she asked, and his heart flipped over in his chest. He hoped Charlie wasn’t still watching. Was it suspicious that he was talking to Maru? Would it be more suspicious for him *not* to talk to Maru? Yoba, this was exhausting.

“Yeah,” he lied, stuffing his hands into his pockets. “You?”

“I think my food baby is big enough to be food twins. Maybe food triplets.”

“Hey, um…” Shane glanced around as though he were a spy in a movie, cursing himself for his lack of chill. “After the presents, do you want to…”

Hang out, he’d meant. *Go somewhere and talk.* But Maru had apparently filled in the mental blanks with her own ideas, and she grinned. “Sure,” she said, in a very different tone.

Oh. Well. They could do that, too.

The presents took for-fucking- *ever*. Everyone in town seemed to be trying extra hard not to tear their wrapping paper, or maybe they were just trying extra hard to piss him off. He gave Clint a stack of frozen pizzas he'd stolen from work; Sebastian gave him a new MegaStation hoodie, which was, huh. Actually a really good gift? Across the circle, he saw Charlie and Harvey lose their ever-loving minds over the painting of Bones that Jas had made for them. Somebody needed to hurry up and give those two a baby, before they started dressing their dog in clothes. Maru got a gift from Alex, a box of cookies that his grandmother had *definitely* baked for him, and she gave him a hug in thanks; Alex let it go on longer than was strictly necessary, and Shane found himself twisting the hood of his new sweatshirt. For the thousandth time, he reached into his backpack, reassuring himself that his gift for Maru was still there. He didn't know where else it would have gone, but still.

Finally, *finally,* the square began to clear out. Desperate to expedite the process, he helped Gus carry the long tables back into the Stardrop's back room. When the bartender stopped yammering at Shane long enough for him to make his escape, he saw that almost everyone had left. Penny and Sam stood chatting with Alex near the Winter Star tree, and Seb and Abigail headed toward the graveyard; in the distance, he saw Charlie and Harvey, already disappearing down the gravel road to the farm. *Thank Yoba,* he thought fervently. He needed them to go home, because if his hunch was correct, Maru would be…

Yep, there it was: one tiny lamp, spilling light out from the window of Harvey's old apartment. Shane headed for the clinic, glancing around again to make sure nobody was watching, but none of the remaining villagers seemed to give a shit where he was sneaking off to. He slipped inside the front door, gritting his teeth as the little bell rang, and locking it behind him.

She always waited for him upstairs. He guessed it was weird to meet for a booty call in the place where you worked, but then again, it was kind of weird to meet for one in your boss's apartment. Still, as far as he knew, Harvey hadn't set foot in the place since he'd moved all his airplane shit into Charlie's house. Sometimes, when he was feeling extra indulgent and pathetic, Shane almost caught himself thinking of it as *theirs*.

He gave himself a moment to think about it as he climbed the stairs. What it would be like, in his imagined other life where he was successful and happy and really *with* Maru, to come home to her at the end of the day. She'd be tinkering with one of her terrifying robots, her hair going wild and her sleeves pushed up above her elbows. He'd give her a kiss and a beer (because if this was a fantasy life, why not imagine one where he wasn't an addict?) and they'd eat takeout on the living room floor, because neither one of them could cook and he knew they'd never bother to learn. And she'd explain to him everything she'd built that day, and he'd listen intently because even though he was too stupid to understand any of it, he could let himself get lost in her: her voice, her passion, her attention.

He reached the top of the stairs, and there she was, sitting on the couch. The light from the lamp gave her a soft golden glow, and she looked so beautiful, his courage nearly failed him. What was he thinking? But then she turned and smiled at him, her nose still a little pink from the cold, and he felt every one of his dumb hopes come flooding back.

He had to try.

“Coming in?” she asked, her soft voice sounding shockingly loud in the silence. He smiled at her as best he could through his nerves, nodding, and crossed the room to sit beside her. Immediately, as though it were a totally natural thing to do, she tucked her feet up under her and nestled into his side. He let his arm settle around her shoulders, feeling her warmth spread into his bones.

“Happy Winter Star,” she said. “Did you get something good?”

“Yeah, your brother gave me this hoodie, actually,” he said, holding it up with one hand. “I was kind of surprised, I didn’t think he knew me that well. He got my size right and everything.”

“He might have had help,” Maru confessed, laughing, and Shane felt an incredulous surge of hope. She had helped pick out a gift for him; she cared enough to want him to have a good holiday, maybe that counted for something…?

“What about you?”

“Eh, Alex gave me cookies, but I know Evelyn made them. Not that I’m complaining, her cookies are amazing. If I wasn’t so full I’d already have demolished them. Want one?”

“Maybe in a little bit,” Shane said, feeling that one bite of food might be enough to send his nervous stomach over the edge. “Um. Listen. I know it’s not really...I know I wasn’t supposed to, but I got you something.”

Maru’s eyes widened. “What?” she demanded, and then lightly smacked his arm. “Damn it! I didn’t get you anything, you should have told me!”

“It’s okay,” Shane assured her, reaching into his backpack. *Now or never.* “It’s kind of, um, well. You’ll get it in a sec.” He took a deep breath, then pulled out his gift: a bouquet from Pierre’s shop, slightly flattened by its long stay in his backpack. He held it out toward her, summoning all of his bravery, and willed himself to get through this without stammering. “So, I know this started as like a, a friends-with-benefits thing. And it’s been great. Um...really great, actually. And the thing is that I, well…” He took a deep breath, let it out slowly. “I really like you, Maru. A lot. You’re, um, kind of amazing? And I wondered if, maybe, you...wanted to…”

He trailed off here, because what Maru thought was obvious. When he’d run through this in his head, he had always kind of hoped she would stop him before the end of the speech, kissing him or taking the flowers or *something.* But his depression-addled brain was used to coming up with worst-case scenarios, and so he’d also spent a lot of time picturing the exact face she was making now: wide eyes, furrowed brows, her mouth set in an unhappy line.

She didn’t want it.

“Look, Shane,” she said gently, after an eon of silence, and oh *shit* it was worse, she *pitied* him, “I really like you too, and I like what we have. It *is* great. And I don’t want you to take this the wrong way, because it’s not like there’s someone else, or anything like that. But I’m just...I’m not looking for a relationship, at all. I was kind of hoping we could just keep what

we have, keep it casual." She put a hand over his—the one *not* holding the flowers, he noticed dimly—and leaned forward. "If you don't want to, I totally understand, okay? I don't want to hurt you."

Half of Shane thought that was probably for the best. It *would* hurt, keeping up with their nameless "thing" and pretending not to feel more. The other half of him, though, was used to hurting, hurt all the time anyway, and as usual, told the sensible first half to fuck off. "No, no, it's fine," Shane insisted, forcing a cheeriness into his voice that didn't even fool himself. "It's—I know it was a long shot. Forget I said anything."

She looked even more miserable at this, and Shane wanted to fling himself out the window. "I'm sorry," she said helplessly. He shook his head, stuffing the flowers mercilessly back into his bag.

"Don't be sorry. It's fine. I'm fine." Shane had literally never been fine, and everyone knew it, so he wasn't sure why he expected her to believe he'd started now.

"I can—do you want me to go?" she asked, and while he didn't know what he wanted, he knew he couldn't bear to lose the feeling of her hand on his. Not yet.

"No," he said, and was relieved to hear that he sounded reasonably sincere. "Don't go." He couldn't have everything he wanted, but he could have some of it, if he didn't fuck it all up. Suddenly sick to death of talking, he slid off the couch to the floor, turning; at the touch of his hands on her knees, Maru's legs fell open. He stroked up her thighs, kissing them through her leggings, and her hand threaded into his hair.

"Are you sure?" she asked, even as she arched into his touch. In response, he gripped her hips with both hands, tugging her sharply to the edge of the couch; she gasped, and he looked up into her eyes. There was still regret there, still uncertainty, but there was also the more familiar haze of arousal.

It was enough. He could make it be enough.

"I'm sure," he murmured, hooking his fingers into her waistband. "Don't go."

* * * * *

The weight of Charlie's backpack on his shoulders threatened to pull him off-balance as he climbed down the ladder, swearing and sweating. All the gems and ore inside clanked in what he imagined as a reproachful way, saying, *haven't you mined enough today?* By any objective measure, he had. He'd found some more gold, a whole bunch of useful coal, and a fistful of promising-looking geodes, and it was only 10 AM. There was no reason for him to be heading down another floor, especially when he'd neglected planting his new spring crops to come down here first thing in the morning. There was only one problem: the pull he'd been feeling for a few dozen floors, that sweetly seductive tug under his skin, had gotten stronger. A *lot* stronger.

So strong, in fact, he couldn't seem to leave.

Charlie didn't understand the force that compelled him downward in the mine, and if he was honest with himself, it had begun to scare him. Before, it had only affected him when he was already *in* the mine, and only as a gentle suggestion—like the cartoonish villains in the D.A.R.E. videos they'd watched in elementary school, trying to convince him to smoke a cigarette: *hey, pal! Just one more floor, come on down, it won't hurt you.* But he'd woken up this morning with a terrible, full-body *craving* to go down there, miles away in his own bed. And so, after making sure the animals were taken care of, he'd given in.

Now he found himself descending to the one hundred and fifteenth floor. *Just one more, just one more and I'll go home.* He had no idea how far beneath the surface he was, but it had to be *far*. Dropping from the bottom of the ladder, he immediately set to work wrenching open the rusty elevator doors and pushed the call button; at least he could make it back down here without climbing a bunch of rickety ladders now. Satisfied that the door would open again when he wanted it to, he started toward a suspiciously sparkly rock half-hidden in shadow on the other side of the floor. Just as he raised his pickaxe, a noise startled him, and he whirled around. But it was a familiar figure: a pitch-black, vaguely human-looking shape, with staring white eyes.

"Oh, hey, Krobus," he said, hooking his pickaxe back onto his pack. "You startled me, man. What are you doing down here?"

The creature opened its mouth, but instead of Krobus's gravelly English, it let out a horrendous grinding screech like tearing metal.

"You're not Krobus," Charlie whispered.

Chapter End Notes

Uh-oh!

Tomorrow: Charlie faces the consequences of his mining adventures, and Harvey deals with the hardest case of his life.

Chapter 27: Spring, Year 3

Chapter Summary

> Charlie faces the consequences of his mining adventures, and Harvey deals with the hardest case of his life.

Chapter Notes

> CONTENT WARNING: This chapter is long, angsty, and contains a fair bit of blood/depictions of injury. We're going to spend a lot of it in the clinic, and it's going to get a little graphic. The graphic stuff happens BEFORE the line of bold asterisks. Just like with the Shane chapter a while back, I'll post a summary of that section in the end notes. If it isn't for you, no shame in that! Take care of yourself!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Harvey drifted in a pleasant sort of monotony, half-listening to the soft jazz music playing from the speakers, half daydreaming about nothing in particular: hot air balloons, whether the cows would look even cuter with bandanas, a new trout recipe he wanted to try. Maru had decided to do some spring cleaning in the OR, which meant he was watching the front desk. He was jolted out of his reverie by the clinic door banging open; Robin bounded through first, ashen-faced.

“Harvey, it’s bad!” she cried, moving aside to hold the door, and as Harvey leapt to his feet he saw why: Demetrius, Linus, and Sebastian were carrying someone on a board suspended between them. Other faces watched anxiously from outside, but Harvey didn’t register who they were. He had a patient; he was already laser-focused, eyes on the trickle of blood leaving a trail behind the party on the floor.

“What happened?” Harvey asked briskly, moving around the counter. He took in all the details in moments: the bleeding, slow now but obviously prolonged; the ashen pallor of the skin; the blue tinge to the fingers; the unnatural angle of the dangling arm, clearly signaling unconsciousness or worse. A glint of silver on one of the fingers, half-painted red with the streaming blood. “Who—” He stopped himself, did a double take.

That glint of silver. A simple, hammered wedding band.

Harvey’s knees abruptly turned to water, and he lurched back against the counter, groping blindly for support. “No,” he whispered, the pit of his stomach falling through the floor. “No, Yoba, please, no!”

Suddenly Robin was at his side, half-hoisting him back to standing. “He’s not dead!” she barked, trying to pull him closer to the board, which the three men were gently lowering to the floor. “Harvey, he’s still alive, but he needs help, he needs you now!”

Harvey dropped to his knees beside his husband, shaking from head to toe, unable to feel relief just yet. Charlie was so soaked in blood it seemed impossible there should be any left in his small, sturdy body. He reached out with trembling fingers, flinched at the shocking cold of Charlie’s skin.

“How long—” he began, preparing to turn Charlie’s head with fingers on his chilled jaw, and Demetrius cut in.

“We’re not sure. Linus found him ten minutes ago, we ran here as fast as we could. He’d got himself mauled somewhere in the mines, but he made it into the elevator. Luckily Linus was heading down; he found him when the doors opened.”

Harvey fought back the sickening mental image of those dingy metal doors sliding apart with their cheery *ding!,* a wave of Charlie’s blood rushing out and soaking into the earth. As he gingerly turned Charlie’s head, he saw the source of all the bleeding: something had bitten him, badly. Nearly his entire shoulder, from neck to arm, was a mess of torn flesh and teeth marks. A wave of nausea overtook him, and he bit down hard on the inside of his mouth to keep from vomiting. He felt quickly down Charlie’s arm, looking for broken bones, and noticed his hands were seriously abraded. A second mental film played itself for him, of Charlie dragging himself across the packed-earth floor, frantic, unable to get his feet beneath him as a nightmarish beast bore down on him. He shook his head, desperate to clear this mental loop, and felt a small, warm hand on his arm. He looked up, stupidly, into Maru’s face.

“Doctor,” she said, not unkindly but briskly. “Trauma victim, male, late 20s, likely hypovolemia from multiple bite wounds to the left trapezius.”

And that was it, wasn’t it: no matter who it belonged to, there was a body in front of Harvey that needed him to fix it. There was no time to get him to a real hospital before stabilizing him, no trauma surgeon who was going to magically swoop in and take care of it. Unless Harvey stopped it, Charlie was going to die. Almost unconsciously, he felt his spine straighten, and he gave Maru a tight nod.

“Get the OR ready,” he ordered.

Charlie fought him, every step of the way. Whatever had bitten him, it had left some horrible substance behind that burned away flesh and dissolved stitches. It took nearly an hour to get the wound clean, during which time Charlie continued to seep blood and looked alarmingly still. Harvey, concerned about his oxygen levels, had intubated him through the mouth; he tried hard not to look at Charlie’s beautiful face, clammy and pale and *wrong* beneath the tube. The IV dripped fluids steadily, trying to help replenish his missing blood, and the heart monitor showed that his heart rate had spiked terrifyingly high. After another hour, Harvey had just managed to get his wounds closed back up, and his nerves felt as raw as Charlie’s

mangled shoulder. He was up to his elbows in blood, could feel smears of it drying on his face where he'd pushed his glasses back up. He fought with all his might not to think about whose blood it was. *Just a patient, just a patient,* he chanted in his mind.

"Doc," Maru said sharply, just as Harvey was finishing the last row of stitches. "Harvey!" Harvey followed her horrified gaze to the heart monitor, and what he saw there nearly stopped his own. Asystole: Charlie's heart, overtaxed by his blood loss, had stopped beating.

"No," he ground out through gritted teeth. "No!" Immediately, he began CPR, shoving down rhythmically onto Charlie's chest, trying to push not just blood but will and love and life through his veins. He did his compressions, checked for a rhythm, did them again. Maru stood wide-eyed, hands gripping Charlie's good arm as though she could tether his soul to his body that way.

The third set of compressions did nothing. "Epinephrine!" Harvey shouted, not taking his eyes or hands off Charlie.

"Should we—"

"NOW, Maru!"

After a few seconds that felt like a few years, Maru was at his elbow with the syringe. Harvey snatched it from her without a word, finding the subclavian vein he'd traced a thousand happier times with reverent fingers, jabbing it in and pushing the plunger. He withdrew the needle and watched, heart in his mouth, as the line on Charlie's heart monitor stayed stubbornly flat.

With a growl of frustration, Harvey started CPR again. Everything around him felt very far away, as though he were observing it from inside a diving suit. None of this was real; it couldn't be happening, *couldn't.* Any moment now he would wake up to find Charlie sleeping beside him, not fighting for his life on Harvey's operating table. There had been some sort of terrible mistake, and someone would surely be along to correct it soon.

Any minute now.

"Trade me," Maru ordered, pushing her shoulder against his arm. "Come on. Protocol. You're getting tired."

"No." His shoulders and arms were screaming at him, but if Harvey stopped working on Charlie, he had a strong suspicion that he would fly into a million pieces. He kept up the compressions, eyes on the monitor.

"Harvey—"

"Get the next dose!"

Another round of epinephrine, another disappointment. Harvey nearly sobbed with frustration. "Stay with me," he begged brokenly, as he started compressions again. "Please, sunflower. Don't leave me."

Out of the corner of his eye, he registered Maru's crumpled face, tears running down her cheeks. "Harvey—" she began tearfully, reaching out toward him, but he batted her arm away.

"No," he snarled, throwing even more of his weight into it. "Not yet." He knew he needed to focus on what he was doing, couldn't afford to think about anything else, but his mind flooded with memories: Charlie first entering the clinic, a smile on his sunburned face, smelling like earth and sunshine; returning weeks later to present Harvey with a jar of homemade pickles, and beaming at Harvey's obvious enthusiasm; leaning against the bar together late one night, Charlie's eyes on the floor as he chatted, his lashes casting soft shadows on his cheekbones while Harvey felt something warm unfurling inside him. He thought of their first kiss, being brave enough to make the first move for once, suspended what felt like miles above the earth in the hot air balloon; their wedding, a few months shy of a year ago, laughing at Lewis good-naturedly blundering through a same-sex ceremony. Not even a year of marriage, he thought through a fresh wave of despair; *"we're just getting started,"* he'd promised Charlie, but now—

"Harvey. HARVEY!" Maru was shouting, pushing on him, and he planted his feet and fought her because he *wasn't giving up,* not yet, he couldn't stop. "For fuck's sake, *look!"* she barked, seizing both of his wrists, and he finally looked up.

Charlie had a pulse.

Harvey nearly convinced himself he was imagining it. The danger was too great; he wasn't sure he'd survive if he allowed himself to get his hopes up. He pressed his fingers against Charlie's neck, gently, an echo of that long-ago night in the woods. A pulse beat slowly there, so faint he almost chalked it up to wishful thinking. But the heart monitor could not be ignored so easily, and as the beeping picked up speed and regularity, Maru's hands squeezed his wrists, almost painfully tight.

"Harvey," she cried, fresh tears in her voice, and Harvey felt the relief dissolving his bones. He dropped hard into the chair beside the bed, suddenly weak with exhaustion. Something was wet on his cheeks; how long had he been crying? A sob tore its way out of his throat, and he slumped forward onto Charlie's stomach, all the horror of the last hours crashing down on him at once. His hands clenched in the blanket over Charlie's hips as he wept, and Maru ran a trembling hand over his hair; he barely registered the touch.

"I'm going to call for an airlift," she said, her voice thick with tears. "They can give him transfusions in the city. Okay?"

Harvey nodded against Charlie's hip, eyes screwed shut. He wanted to say something to her — *what would I do without you* seemed like a good start—but his voice seemed to have deserted him. She seemed to know anyway, giving his shoulder a squeeze before moving away. Harvey turned his head, watching the most beautiful sight he'd ever seen: the regular, even peaks of his husband's heartbeat, making their way across the screen.

* *

The first thing Charlie registered was the insistent, steady beeping of the heart monitor. Clinic, then: he wasn't dead, at least. It was a start.

The second wave of awareness came far less gently, as all the pain crashed into his consciousness like the Calico Desert bus. His shoulder burned and stung—no surprises there, he was surprised he still *had* a shoulder after that Shadow Brute had got hold of him—but worse than that was the horrible constricting ache in his chest, as though someone had jumped on him. *Had* someone jumped on him? It was all a bit of a blur. He stirred a little, testing to see what else hurt (conclusion: everything, all of it, fuck, fuck), and became aware of a warm weight on his left hip. With a Herculean effort, he peeled his gummy eyelids apart, just a crack; when his eyes adjusted, what he saw made his chest ache in an entirely different way.

He wasn't in the clinic after all: this was clearly a hospital room, smaller and more packed with equipment than the clinic OR. Harvey was seated in a hideous plastic chair, pulled up close to his bedside. He'd leaned forward and pillowed his head on his arms, resting them on Charlie's hip. He was fast asleep and obviously had been for some time, but it seemed to have taken him by surprise; he still wore his glasses, knocked askew and digging painfully into the bridge of his nose. His sleeves were rolled up above the elbow, his tie gone, and there was a small smear of dried blood down the right side of his jaw. Charlie drank in the sight of him, disheveled and exhausted, and thought that he'd never seen anything so beautiful in his life.

As his eyes roamed over Harvey's sleeping face, he noticed the puffiness of those eyes—puffiness that couldn't be explained away by sleep. Harvey had been crying, and Charlie felt a horrible pang of guilt. What must it have done to him, he wondered, to have to salvage the wreckage of his mutilated husband? How close had Charlie come to toppling over the edge of oblivion? He'd felt sure, down there on Floor 115, that he was going to die. His last thought before he'd lost consciousness had been of Harvey, of how sorry he was not to be able to say goodbye, of breaking his promises and leaving him alone again. Harvey must have been furious.

A cramp seized in his bad arm, and Charlie shifted involuntarily, grimacing against the sharp pain. The movement traveled to his lower body, and Harvey inhaled hard through his nose, turning his face sleepily against Charlie's blankets. He arched his back a little, groaning as the horrible position caught up with him, then froze. Charlie was already smiling, helpless to stop himself, so endlessly glad to see him.

"Hello," he tried to whisper, but it came out as more of a gravelly rasp. Harvey turned his head slowly, infinitesimally, as though he hardly dared to look at him. When their eyes met at last, Harvey's were damp again.

"Charlie," he whispered, and seemed to be at a loss for words; he hadn't even picked his head up off the blankets yet. Straining hard—gravity seemed to be working overtime on his arms—Charlie lifted a hand and settled it, trying for gentleness, into Harvey's hair. Even against his soft hair, the skin of his hands felt stingy and raw. A tear spilled over from Harvey's eye, pooling against the bridge of his nose.

"I'm so sorry," Charlie rasped. "Baby, I can't tell you—"

He didn't get any more out, because Harvey had abruptly lurched up from the bed and launched himself at Charlie. One of his arms went over Charlie's good shoulder, the other one under the small of his back, and he buried his hot face in the skin of Charlie's neck.

"I'm just—so glad," Harvey managed, though his voice trembled a little. "So glad you're still here."

"You were all I could think about," Charlie murmured into his hair, the gravel in his voice easing slightly as he spoke. "Getting back to you, seeing you again—it's all that kept me going. I was so afraid you wouldn't know what had happened, you'd never be able to find me…"

"No," Harvey interrupted, pulling back to look into his face. His eyes were wet but the tears had stopped falling, and Charlie saw a blazing determination there, the same thing he'd seen that day in the hot air balloon. "I would have found you. I never would've stopped looking."

Heedless of his morning breath and the blood on Harvey's face, Charlie pulled him in for a passionate kiss, pouring all of his regret and gratitude and promises into it. Harvey made a small pained sound into his mouth and clung to him, giving it all right back. It felt like it went on for ages, and Charlie never wanted to stop, so grateful for this man in his arms—this man who had, in so many ways, saved his life.

Eventually, though, the kiss wound down, and Harvey pulled back with obvious reluctance, his eyes still closed. They opened slowly, just inches from Charlie's face, as though he were afraid to let him out of his sight again. Harvey seemed content to just go on looking at him forever, not saying another word.

"How bad was it?" Charlie whispered at last, and a pained line appeared between Harvey's eyebrows. He seemed to be struggling to find words.

"Bad," he said at last, and dropped his gaze. Charlie, awash in fresh guilt, reached out to stroke a stinging hand down his cheek, and Harvey leaned into the touch. All at once, he felt a searing pain in his side, letting his arm fall back to the bed with a hiss of pain.

"Shit!"

"You've got a few broken ribs," Harvey said, splaying his fingers feather-light over Charlie's left side. Charlie winced, struggling to get comfortable again. "To be honest, I don't know if you had them when you came in, or if I broke them."

"You?" Charlie asked, not understanding. His brain felt frustratingly sluggish.

"CPR is hard on the body." Harvey said it in a neutral tone, but he wouldn't look at him, and Charlie knew there was a lot of suffering contained in that one short sentence.

"I'm sorry," he said again. Harvey nodded slowly.

"I know you didn't mean to," he said quietly. "I know there's a bit of danger in you, and I...I *like* that, Char, if I'm honest with myself. But I can't handle this." He lifted his eyes again,

and his voice was steady this time. “Please don’t put me through this again. Don’t go back in there. Promise me you won’t.”

Charlie’s heart sank. It was a simple request, he knew, and a sensible one. But even now, after nearly getting himself killed—after waking up, presumably, hundreds of miles from the Valley—he felt the pull, as strong as ever. “Harvey, I *have* to,” he began weakly, and Harvey sat up straight, pulling away from him. Charlie felt as though he’d been doused in ice water, but he pressed on. “I need the ore for the farm—”

“Clint has ore,” Harvey pointed out, not looking at him.

“He does, you’re right. That’s...not all.” Why, why was he even hiding it? He felt like an addict hiding a drinking problem, making excuses. Looking at Harvey, sitting three feet away with his arms wrapped protectively around himself, Charlie knew he had to come clean. He took a deep breath, knowing things were about to get messy. “The truth is, darlin’, there’s something in there that calls to me. I can feel it under my skin, like the vibration from a loud noise. I’ve felt it for a while now, but it’s gotten...stronger, lately.”

Harvey was looking at him now, but Charlie didn’t like the look. His eyebrows were drawn together, the corners of his mouth pinched; he was afraid, Charlie realized. “Can you hear yourself?” Harvey asked. “Something *‘calling’* to you? How do you not see how dangerous that sounds?”

“I know. I know.” Charlie swallowed. “I, um, I’ve kind of been hoping that if I reached the bottom, maybe, well. Maybe it would stop.”

“Or whatever’s down there will *kill you,”* Harvey said incredulously, and Charlie couldn’t even logically argue with him. He closed his eyes, feeling shaky and frightened and very small.

“I don’t know how to stop,” he admitted. “I don’t know if I can.” He felt the bed shift, and when he opened his eyes, Harvey had walked away; he stood staring out the window at the overcast day, his face hidden. Charlie felt a terrible spike of fear. “Are you going to leave me?” he whispered, hating himself, hating whatever stupid connection he had to the stupid mines. If Harvey *did* leave him, he would deserve it. At last, Harvey turned back to him, looking exhausted and much older than he was.

“No. I’ve already almost lost you once; I can’t do it again. But if you won’t promise not to go back in, I need you to promise something else.”

“Anything,” Charlie pleaded, “I want to make you happy, I *do,* I just—”

“Take me with you,” Harvey interrupted, with an air of finality. “If you *have* to go back, take me down there, too.”

Charlie huffed out a little laugh of disbelief, then could have kicked himself at the hurt that flashed in Harvey’s eyes. “No—wait—”

“I might not be the most adventurous, Charlie, but I’m not a *coward.”*

“I don’t think that at all—would you just—” Gritting his teeth against the pain, Charlie pushed the blankets aside and tried to get his feet underneath him; he needed Harvey in his arms again, needed to reassure both of them that they were going to get through this. Harvey let out a bark of alarm and rushed to his side, pushing him back down.

“Have you lost your mind? You were dead six hours ago! Lie back down!”

“I’m just—wait, dead?” Charlie repeated blankly.

“One thing at a time!”

“Right, sorry, sorry.” Charlie allowed himself to be manhandled back into the bed, but when Harvey smoothed the covers and made to retreat, Charlie caught him by the wrist and held him there. “I know you’re brave, darlin’. You’re the bravest man I’ve ever known. Do you think I didn’t know that? What about the balloon ride?”

“You mean the balloon ride where I shook like a leaf and wouldn’t let go of your hand the whole time?” Harvey perched on the edge of the bed again, looking at the floor with a rueful smile. “Great example.”

“It *is* a great example. You were so scared, but you did it anyway. That’s real courage.” He took a deep breath, trailed a hand down Harvey’s spine; Harvey shivered. “It’s not that I don’t think you can protect me, sweetheart. It’s just such an awful, dark, violent place, and you’re so good and kind and gentle. It’s like...trying to take the sun with me. I couldn’t picture it, that’s all. You heal things; everything down there is trying to do the opposite.”

Harvey turned his face toward him, keeping his eyes downcast. “I may surprise you one of these days,” he murmured.

“You always surprise me.”

At that, those beautiful green eyes finally looked up at him, peering through his lashes. “Please promise me, Charlie,” he asked, his voice soft but urgent. “You don’t know how close I came to losing you. I can’t—talk about it, yet, but believe me. It’s a miracle you’re still here.” He gripped Charlie’s wrist, his fingers trembling again. “I can’t let you go in there alone again. *Please* let me be there to help you.”

Charlie exhaled. “All right,” he agreed, and then Harvey was kissing him again, and he let the last of the tension drain out of him. Things weren’t okay yet, not really. Charlie still felt the siren song of the mines pulling at him; every muscle and bone in his body ached, as did his heart. But he couldn’t bring himself to worry about any of that with Harvey’s warmth surrounding him. For now, there was what really mattered: just them, just this.

* * * * *

It was a strange sentiment for a doctor to express, but Harvey hated hospitals. Oh, sure, he’d spent plenty of time in them in his city GP days, and of course he still worked at the clinic, but being on the *patient* side of things: it was a nightmare. Zuzu Memorial didn’t care that he was a doctor, or even that he was *Charlie’s* doctor. He didn’t have admitting privileges, and

so he was relegated to the sidelines. This meant he didn't have access to any drugs for Charlie; he couldn't help him directly when his pain became unmanageable, could only call for a nurse. And worst of all, it also meant he couldn't get either of them a little drugged up before delivering unwelcome news.

"Char," he said tentatively, smoothing an invisible wrinkle in the blanket as Charlie flipped listlessly through an old comic book. Three days in bed had made the farmer restless and snappish; he wanted to go home, wanted to get out of bed, and wanted people to stop fussing over him, and none of those things were happening. Harvey had seen it a thousand times before in patients, but never in Charlie, and it rattled him a little. "You're going to have a visitor today."

Charlie looked up at this, surprise on his features. "Who would travel all this way? It's not Shane, is it? He should stay with the farm, not—"

"No, no, Shane's got the farm covered. It's, um." Harvey cleared his throat, stalling, and Charlie tilted his head in confusion. "It's your mother," he admitted at last.

Ah, there it was, the look he'd been dreading since yesterday. Charlie's eyes widened for just a moment, and then he schooled his features into indifference, turning away.

"How did she know I was here," he asked flatly, and Harvey assumed it was a rhetorical question. He answered anyway.

"I called her while you were unconscious."

"Why."

"Honey, she's your *mom,"* Harvey said, with as much patience and gentleness as he could muster. "I know you haven't spoken since before the wedding, and I know why. But the circumstances have changed, and—"

"No, they haven't."

"You went into cardiac arrest, Charlie. You had to be brought here in a helicopter, you had to be intubated and resuscitated. You don't think she deserves to know?"

"Would your uncle deserve to know if you almost died?"

Harvey let his eyes fall closed, doing his best to hide the stab of pain he felt at that question. He wasn't sure which was the cruelest part: invoking the family that had disowned him, or reminding him that Charlie nearly hadn't made it. "Do you want to try that again?" he asked quietly, looking at the floor. "Or did you actually want to hurt me?"

Charlie had the courtesy to look ashamed, which mollified Harvey a bit. "I'm sorry," he said, and sounded like he meant it. "I shouldn't have said that."

"Thank you. Just…" He reached for Charlie's hand, and was relieved when Charlie let him take it. "I know you're frustrated and in pain, but I'm only trying to help you. Remember that, okay?"

“I will.” Charlie sighed, slumping against the pillows. “But, V. It wasn’t your decision to make, calling her.”

“Actually, it was,” Harvey said. “Literally, legally my decision. You made me your next of kin, remember?”

“That’s not really what I meant.”

“I know it wasn’t. But try to see it from my perspective.” Harvey swallowed hard; it was still difficult to talk about those awful hours before Charlie had woken up. “You’d been unconscious for hours. We didn’t...we weren’t sure if you’d wake up again, or what state your brain would be in if you did. I understand you’re upset with her, but I also know that you love her. And you’re her only family.”

Charlie was softening, he could tell, but he wasn’t quite ready to concede yet; he scowled, looking so much like Alice that Harvey nearly let out a nervous laugh. “It was her decision not to be closer, you know. She said those shitty things about you and about Pelican Town—hell, about *me*— and then she just let us walk out and never spoke to us again.”

Well, damn. Harvey had known he would have to confess someday, but today wouldn’t have been his first choice. Still: might as well air all the bad news at once, he supposed. “Actually,” he hedged, taking his hand back and twisting it nervously with the other, “I spoke to her.” He glanced up at Charlie from the safety of his bangs; Charlie blinked at him, uncomprehending.

“What? When?”

“Um. About thirty minutes after you did.” He watched, filled with apprehension, as the gears turned in Charlie’s mind; at last, his mouth dropped open, the realization clicking into place.

“When you left the hotel,” he said slowly. “You went back?”

Harvey nodded, taking off his glasses to clean them on his shirt. “I couldn’t stand you two being angry at each other because of me,” he said, and when Charlie opened his mouth to speak, he held up a hand. “I know. I know. But I thought maybe if I spent some time with her, I could convince her that I could make you happy. And to come to the wedding.”

Charlie sat for a moment, apparently mulling his over. “She said no,” he ventured, not really a question.

“She said she’d think about it. But...well. You know how that turned out.” Charlie fell silent again, staring into the middle distance; Harvey waited as long as he could, but eventually he couldn’t stand the suspense anymore. “Are you angry with me?”

Charlie let out a long exhale, blowing the hair out of his face. “I wish you’d told me,” he said at last, and Harvey’s stomach lurched. “But your heart was in the right place. And anyway, I don’t really have the right to be mad at you for anything, I don’t think. Not after…” With his good arm, he gestured ruefully at his mangled shoulder. Harvey sat forward, shaking his head.

“If you’re thinking that you somehow owe me for that—”

“Of *course* I owe you.”

“—then you’re wrong.”

“How could I not?” Charlie laughed mirthlessly, his eyebrows drawing together. “You saved my life.”

“Yes. I did.” There was no point pretending otherwise, really; false modesty wasn’t going to get them through this discussion any faster. “And I would have saved your life whether or not I was in love with you, because I’m a *doctor.”*

“I know—”

“But because I *am* in love with you,” Harvey barreled on, because Charlie needed to understand this, “that wasn’t just saving your life. That was saving mine.” The parts of it worth living, anyway.

Charlie looked as though he might cry; the corners of his mouth turned down, and he blinked hard. “Harvey,” he whispered, “if something ever *does* happen to me, you have to—”

“No,” Harvey interrupted, getting abruptly to his feet, “no. Don’t.”

“I need to—”

“Stop. Stop.” He put both hands out in front of him, as though he could shield himself from Charlie’s words; even at the very thought, the nausea had come welling up inside him again. Charlie fell silent, staring at him in mute unhappiness, and Harvey gripped his good forearm gently. “We *will* talk about it. Someday. Okay? I promise, we will, but I can’t—” He gritted his teeth, forcing the lump in his throat back down. “It just happened, Charlie. I can’t yet. I just can’t.” Along with the nausea came a wave of panic; he’d been having those intermittently ever since the incident. He fought to slow his breathing, which had sped up throughout his speech. Charlie turned his arm over, catching Harvey’s hand in his own.

“Okay, darlin’, it’s okay. I won’t talk about it. Come here.” He tugged at Harvey’s hand, and Harvey sat on the edge of the bed, leaning forward to rest his forehead against Charlie’s good shoulder. He felt a kiss pressed to his temple, and a little of the panic subsided; he breathed deeply, finding Charlie’s calming scent beneath the layers of antiseptic and hospital detergent. “When is my mom coming?” It was an obvious attempt to change the subject, but Harvey grabbed it like a lifeline.

“In about an hour.” He lifted his face, meeting Charlie’s eyes. “I’m not going to force you, honey. If you really don’t want to see her, I’ll call her and tell her not to come.”

Charlie sighed again, shaking his head. “I’ll see her,” he said begrudgingly. “But stay close, okay?”

“You want me in here?”

“Oh, yeah.” Charlie offered him a smile, weak and small, but it was something. “I can’t storm out of here, so if things go south, I’ll need a bouncer.”

“Understood.”

Harvey had anticipated grief and shock from Charlie’s mother, and had been braced for that as he waited for her at the hospital visitors’ entrance. What he *hadn’t* expected—stupidly, he realized now—was rage. Alice stormed through the doors like a tiny hurricane, anger pouring off of her in waves. She barely slowed as she passed Harvey, completely ignoring his feeble greeting.

“I have been trying to visit for *three days,”* she seethed, punching the elevator button with more force than strictly necessary. “They wouldn’t let me in. You had no right.”

“I did,” Harvey said, gently but firmly. “As his doctor and his husband. With all due respect, Alice, you two haven’t spoken in close to a year. He needed to be awake for this, and he hasn’t been.”

“What exactly happened to my son, Harvey?” she demanded as they boarded the elevator. Harvey pressed the floor number and sighed.

“I’m going to let him give you the details. Forgive me. It’s difficult for me to talk about.”

“You’re a *doctor,”* she said incredulously, and he couldn’t tell if she was ridiculing him or not. “It was really that bad?”

“Yes.” Harvey glanced at her from the corner of his eyes. “It was.”

Alice opened her mouth, then closed it, and they stood in silence as the floors ticked by. “I think you should—prepare yourself,” he said at last, the elevator slowing to a stop. “He’s had excellent care, and he’s doing well, but he’s been through...a lot.”

Alice made a discontented noise; Harvey didn’t know her well enough to tell if she was dismissing his concerns or agreeing with them. The moment the doors were open, she strode away down the hall, Harvey hurrying along in her wake. When they reached Charlie’s room, he tried to poke his head in first, but she barreled ahead of him—and then stopped in her tracks, a few feet inside the door. Harvey stood behind her, eyes on Charlie, and tried to see the scene from her perspective.

Charlie was doing well, from a medical standpoint. He was no longer on supplementary oxygen, since he’d been breathing well, but that was about the only visible improvement. An IV delivered antibiotics, working to keep the mess of his shoulder from becoming infected. Instead of a shirt, which was too painful to maneuver past his bad shoulder and broken ribs, he wore a loosely-draped gown. From beneath its collar, a wide swath of bandages extended up the side of his neck, and mottled bruising emerged beneath that. While the abrasions on his hands had been minor, and had mostly healed, they still looked angry and red. And then

there was his face: his left eye blackened, angry grazes along his jaw. Not to mention its expression, which hovered somewhere between “resigned” and “hostile.”

“Charlie,” Alice choked out, and Harvey realized she was on the verge of tears. “Oh, my boy.” In a flurry of movement, she crossed the room and put her arms around Charlie; he didn’t pull away, but neither did he reciprocate. He met Harvey’s eyes over her shoulder, and Harvey gazed back, trying to project solidarity and calm. “How did this happen?” Alice asked, pulling back, wiping her eyes and sitting on the edge of the bed. Harvey wasn’t sure Charlie would answer—he hadn’t made a sound yet—but at last he exhaled, letting his head drop against the pillows.

“I went into the mines,” he said, prompting a gasp from Alice, “and I got attacked by a wild animal. I don’t know what it was,” he lied; he and Harvey had discussed this, and decided it would be too difficult to explain the concept of real-life monsters to people who didn’t live in the Valley. (Even though Alice had once, who knew whether she'd ever encountered them?) “Tore my shoulder up. I lost a lot of blood, broke some ribs, had to have a transfusion.”

“Harvey told me you went into *cardiac arrest,”* she countered, her voice still shaking. “That you had to be resuscitated.”

“Yeah.”

She shook her head. “What were you doing going into the *mines?”* she demanded. “Those were abandoned even back when I was a kid!”

“I know. It was a mistake.” They’d also decided not to tell Alice that Charlie’s mine expeditions were a common occurrence. Harvey couldn’t imagine that news going over well, and at any rate, he hoped they *wouldn’t* be common anymore. He still didn’t understand the force that compelled Charlie to return, but he believed his husband when he said he wouldn’t go back in without him.

Alice looked around, a stricken expression on her face. “Thank God they were able to get you here in time,” she said fervently. “It’s dangerous to live so far from a real hospital.”

“Actually, Mom, they brought me here after I was stabilized,” he corrected her, his tone taking on a hard edge. She looked at him in surprise.

“What do you—”

“Harvey saved me. At home.” He launched into the short version of the events at the clinic; Harvey did his best to tune it out, fiddling with Charlie’s chart. He knew he would never forget what had happened, and the objective, “doctory” side of his brain knew that he should probably hash it out with a professional therapist at some point. But like Charlie, he was still in the early stages of his recovery, and he felt it best not to put too much strain on the wound.

Charlie finished his story with the stabilization of his pulse, and silence fell in the room. Alice turned to Harvey for the first time since she’d arrived, her eyes wide and damp. “Is all that true?” she asked him.

“Um.” Harvey scrubbed a hand uncomfortably through his hair. “Yes, it is.”

Wordlessly, Alice rose from the bed, crossing to where Harvey stood; he watched her apprehensively, unsure what to do. When she reached him, to his great surprise, she flung her arms around his neck. He looked to Charlie for guidance, but his husband looked just as baffled as he was, so he settled for patting her back awkwardly.

“Thank you,” she said, her voice muffled against his shoulder. “Thank you.”

“It—um—” There wasn’t a great response for this: *my pleasure? It’s my job? I had to do it, because I can’t live without him?* “I’m glad I could do it,” he finally settled on, feeling a vast gulf between what he meant and what he could say out loud.

She finally pulled back, but Harvey’s relief was short-lived; she caught his face in her hands, staring him straight in the eyes, and he was more trapped than ever. He felt himself turning pink under the scrutiny. “I’m glad he has you,” she said solemnly, and *that* was the biggest surprise yet. He wished he could see Charlie’s reaction, but it felt rude to look away.

“Okay, Mom, let him go,” Charlie said at last, and she did, giving a damp little chuckle. She returned to Charlie, sitting in the chair beside the bed.

“It’s a good thing you married a doctor,” she said, and before she’d even finished the sentence, Harvey knew it was a mistake. Charlie’s face hardened, and his next words came out in a distinctly chilly tone.

“Yeah. It was a beautiful wedding. Too bad you missed it.”

“Oh, Charlie, can we not do this right now? Please.”

“Mom, you skipped my *wedding,* and I still don’t know why. We have to talk about this.”

Alice sighed, staring at her hands. Harvey wondered vaguely if he should leave, but he’d promised Charlie he would stay; as unobtrusively as possible, he crossed to the other side of the bed, looking out the window. Behind him, Alice took a deep breath.

“The truth is, I don’t think I’m welcome back in Pelican Town.”

A derisive noise from Charlie. “Come on, Mom, that’s ridiculous. People move away, it happens.”

“I didn’t just move away.” There was a beat of silence, and Harvey pretended to be intensely interested in the construction crew working on the building next door, rather than straining to hear Alice’s every word. “Your grandfather, he...We had a fight. About your dad.”

“He didn’t like Dad?”

“He didn’t like me leaving for good. He was fine with college, but I think he’d always hoped I’d take over the farm one day. We...well, we both said some awful things before I left, and we stopped speaking.” She paused for a long moment; Harvey watched her reflection in the window, composing herself. “Some of our neighbors back home, they tried to get us to make

up. They wrote to me, told me how he was doing, how much he missed me. But I." She cleared her throat. "I didn't want to hear it. I cut everyone off, even my best friends. I never wrote back, and eventually, they all stopped trying."

Silence fell over the room. Harvey felt that he understood the mystery of Alice at last; it was far easier to pretend you didn't want to return home than to admit you were afraid you wouldn't be welcome. He turned back around, unsure how Charlie would take all this. His husband sat very still, eyeing Alice, who stared mutely down at her lap. Did Charlie see something of himself in her, he wondered? The circumstances had been different, but the result the same: a child leaving home, cutting all their ties to their old life. History really did repeat itself.

"Maybe," Charlie said, his voice a little hoarse, "it's time to put the past behind you, Mom."

Alice gave a little shake of her head. "It's not that easy."

"Maybe not. Or maybe it is. Don't you at least want to find out?"

"I…" Alice seemed to be struggling for words. "I don't know, Charlie. I'm not sure I can go back. But...I want to talk to you again." She put a hand on the rail of his bed, leaning forward. "I miss you."

Charlie looked away. "I'm gonna be honest with you, Mom. I miss you too," he said. "But it really, really hurt me when you said those things. About Harvey, about the farm, about me. I have a whole life in Pelican Town, and I'm happy, and you acted like none of it mattered at all. If you want to be in my life, you have to at least try to be happy for me." He lifted the hand of his bad arm, a silent request, and Harvey took it in his own. Alice looked between them, then back at Charlie.

"I *am* happy for you, sweetheart," she said softly, and it sounded genuine to Harvey's ears. "I was wrong, and I'm sorry. I shouldn't have acted that way." She swallowed and looked up at Harvey, seeming nervous. "I wanted to apologize to you, too, Harvey. You seem like a good man, and I know you love my boy."

"Thank you," Harvey said, squeezing Charlie's hand. "I do."

She smiled at him, briefly but warmly, before returning her gaze to Charlie. "Can I write to you again?" she asked. "I promise, I won't try to convince you to come back. I'll behave."

Even now, Harvey wasn't sure what Charlie's response would be. He hoped they could patch things up, but it was Charlie's decision, and Harvey was prepared to stand behind him no matter what he chose. At last, Charlie cleared his throat.

"We have a phone now," he said. "Harvey can write down our number."

The smile that crossed Alice's face was so joyful, she looked exactly like her son for a moment. She reached out and took Charlie's other hand, he let her, and then the three of them just stayed like that for a moment. Something loosened in Harvey's chest, something that had knotted up the day Charlie had stormed out of his childhood home.

But Charlie's hand in his was clammy, and he knew it was time to put a stop to the tiring emotional discussions for one day. "Alice, thank you for coming, but Charlie needs to rest now," he said, as gently as he could; he felt Charlie squeeze his hand gratefully. Alice stood, nodding.

"Of course. Can I visit again tomorrow?" she asked, directing this last question to Charlie.

"Sure."

"I'll walk you out." He leaned down to kiss Charlie on the forehead, lingering for a moment. "When I get back, we'll get you some more pain meds so you can take a nap, okay?"

Charlie let his eyes drift closed, smiling. "Thanks, darlin'."

He saw Alice off at the elevator with a promise to let her know when Charlie was awake tomorrow, and then he stopped by the nurses' station, asking them to come give Charlie his next dose of medication. But when he returned to the room, he pulled up short in surprise: for the first time in three days, Charlie had fallen asleep without drugs.

It felt like progress.

Chapter End Notes

Content summary: Charlie, who has been attacked by a Shadow Brute in the mines, is brought into the clinic unconscious. Harvey and Maru clean his wounds and stitch him up, but his heart stops in the process. After a long battle with CPR, they are able to revive him, and he's airlifted to Zuzu City.

Whew! I'm sorry to have put our boys through that, but I wanted to address something that happens in-game. I always thought it must be awful for Harvey to have to take care of the player after they get knocked out in the mines. On top of that, he sometimes mentions having nightmares about the player's limp body being wheeled into the emergency room, and...I couldn't not talk about that?

Thanks for sticking with me! I know this one was long and mostly unhappy. I promise, better times are on the horizon again!

Tomorrow: The boys find their way home, in more ways than one. Maru lays down the law. Shane makes some changes, and gets by with a little help from his friends.

Chapter 28: Spring, Year 3

Chapter Summary

The boys find their way home, in more ways than one. Maru lays down the law. Shane makes some changes, and gets by with a little help from his friends.

Chapter Notes

Some NSFW content this chapter, and some more angst, but no more blood!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"They remembered me!" Charlie announced happily, surrounded by a madly-clucking mob of chickens. Pizza, Blue Ivy, and the Spice Girls all appeared happy to see him, in their chickeny way; they hopped around his feet, Pizza pecking at his shoe as if to say, *where the hell have you been?*

"Of course they did," Harvey said, smiling (and keeping his distance). "Did you worry they wouldn't?"

He had. He'd worried about *everything:* whether the chickens would forget him, whether Bones would get depressed, how badly he'd fucked up this season by not getting his crops into the ground on day one. But the chickens remembered him, as did the barn animals, and Shane had taken it upon himself to plant all the seeds Charlie had planned out for the season. True, they were planted in a slightly haphazard and inefficient layout, but Charlie was still almost overcome with gratitude to his friend.

There was just one more important reunion he had to complete, and it wasn't going to happen standing in the chicken coop. He scattered a few handfuls of corn for the chickens—awkwardly, with one hand—before heading back out and toward the house. Harvey slipped an arm around his waist as he reached the steps, supporting him; Charlie gave him a brief smile, trying not to let his pain show on his face. He'd been doing his best to keep a stone face these last few days, desperate to get out of the hospital and back home. After ten days of inpatient treatment, Harvey had finally managed to convince his other doctors that he was well enough to return to the Valley, though he'd had to promise to keep Charlie mostly in bed. It was a trade-off Charlie was happy to make, since at least it was his *own* bed, and big enough for Harvey to sleep beside him.

"He's probably going to be pretty wound up," Harvey warned, as they reached the door. "Just try to take it easy, okay? Your ribs are still really fragile, don't let him—"

“Bones!” Charlie cried, as a furry brown comet shot out of the front door and directly at him. Trying to protect his ribs, Charlie overbalanced, and sat hard on the porch; oh, *fuck,* it hurt (and scared the hell out of Harvey, going by the shout of alarm he let out), but it didn’t seem to have actually damaged anything. He threw his good arm around the hopping, wiggling mass of dog, burying his face in Bones’s neck. Bones whimpered and wagged as though he’d thought Charlie was never coming back, which Charlie supposed was possible. Did dogs understand things like extended hospital stays?

“All right, Bones, that’s enough, come on.” Harvey waved a stick under Bones’s nose, getting his attention. “Go get it, boy!” He threw the stick as hard as he could, and Bones bounded away, barking. Harvey took the opportunity to help Charlie to his feet, his expression hovering somewhere between concern and amusement. “Are you all right, honey? He didn’t hurt you, did he?”

“No, I’m okay.” He was, mostly, although now his ass kind of hurt on top of everything else. But the relief of being back home eclipsed the pain, even the ever-present burn in his shoulder. As he swayed on his feet, finding his balance again, both of Harvey’s arms went around his waist; on impulse, Charlie leaned forward and kissed him. Harvey made a little noise of surprise but kissed back, and oh, that was lovely. He’d spent most of the last ten days with Doctor Harvey, who was wonderful in his own right, but he missed Husband Harvey. He missed the easy, casual intimacy they had at home, without any nurses or monitors or IV drips in the way.

“Welcome home,” Harvey said when they broke away, his eyes filled with warmth. Charlie leaned their foreheads together for a moment before straightening up and stepping through the door; behind him, Harvey picked up their bags. They made their way to the bedroom, where Harvey dropped their things and pulled back the quilt on the bed.

“Are you tired?” he asked. “Do you want to lie down?”

Charlie was tempted; he *was* tired. It was hugely frustrating how exhausted he got doing the most basic tasks. But the stench of hospital still clung to him, and he knew he wouldn’t feel totally at home until he got rid of it. “Actually, I’d love to take a shower first,” he said. “But I, um...could you…” He hated having to ask, which he knew was ridiculous, given that he couldn’t even move his left arm. But Harvey understood.

“I’ll help you,” Harvey assured him, smiling. “Sit down for just a moment, and I’ll get the water started.”

Getting out of his clothes was just as hellish as getting into them had been. Charlie had insisted that he was taking the train ride in a *shirt,* not a *gown.* This entailed inching a sleeve up his left arm (without moving it, since the tiniest movement of that arm set his ribs on fire again), draping it gently over the thicket of stitches on his shoulder, then tugging the other sleeve just as gently up his right arm without twisting it behind his back (because, again, ribs) before buttoning it in front. Which Harvey had to do, because Charlie couldn’t move his fucking arm. Now, they had to do the whole stupid process in reverse—or rather, Harvey did, while Charlie stood around uselessly. He was sweating by the time the shirt landed on the floor, and then he had to balance awkwardly on the edge of the bed while Harvey pulled off

his pants and underwear. Harvey quickly stripped off his own clothes, following Charlie into the shower.

“I can rinse myself off, if you don’t want to,” Charlie protested weakly, but Harvey just reached for the shampoo.

“It’ll be hard to wash your hair one-handed. I can do it for you, I don’t mind.” Charlie stopped arguing then, feeling a mix of gratitude and embarrassment he couldn’t quite reconcile. But when Harvey’s long, graceful fingers started working suds through his hair, he forgot the embarrassment side of the equation; it felt too heavenly to worry about anything. He let his head tilt back as much as he could without tugging at his stitches, and Harvey massaged his scalp for what felt like ages. He maneuvered Charlie under the spray to rinse, then repeated the whole process with conditioner. When he began washing Charlie’s body, thoroughly and carefully, Charlie suddenly became very aware that they hadn’t had sex in two weeks; certain neglected areas of his anatomy were coming to attention. The thought struck him that a round of mutual shower handjobs might be a nice way to wind down before bed, but when he glanced down, he saw that he was the only one aroused. All at once, he felt intensely self-conscious. Had Harvey not noticed, or was he just tired? Or was he not attracted to Charlie in his current state? Charle couldn’t blame him if that were the case; the mass of stitches in his shoulder looked thorny and twisted, and was at a particularly scabby stage right now. On top of that, his chest and neck were still black and blue, and one of his eyes still wore a yellowish ring. He knew he wasn’t exactly pretty to look at.

Harvey noticed; Charlie could tell the moment he did, watching his hand falter and his posture stiffen. “Um—” Harvey began, haltingly, but Charlie interrupted him.

“Don’t worry about it. It just feels really good, what you’re doing. I’m sorry.”

“No need to be sorry,” Harvey said, with a quick smile. “No offense, though, but I think we both need our rest. I’m just going to finish getting you washed up and into bed, okay?”

“Definitely. Thanks.” He felt a sudden, intense rush of gratitude toward Harvey. Things were a little stiff between them (no pun intended), but Harvey was still being as sweet and kind as ever, taking care of him without a word of complaint even though Charlie had gotten himself into this whole stupid mess.

Charlie’s erection eventually subsided, realizing it wasn’t going to get any attention, and they got themselves dried off and into bed. Neither of them bothered with shirts, just pulling on clean underwear and climbing under the sheets. It took Charlie some maneuvering to get comfortable, but at last he got himself arranged against the pillows. Harvey nestled beside him, not as close as he would have liked, but he understood that there were few areas on his body not currently bruised or stitched up. He twined their fingers together, and Harvey kissed the back of his hand, slow and soft.

“Hey,” Charlie prompted him, and Harvey glanced up from behind his hand. “I love you.”

“I love you too, sunflower,” Harvey murmured, and Charlie felt warm all over. Harvey hadn’t called him that since he’d woken up in the hospital. “It’s good to be home.”

“It really, really is.”

He had visitors. Not many—Harvey had told everyone in town to let him rest, and that he would let them know when Charlie was up and about—but a select few friends came to see him. Shane was around, of course, working the fields. When he saw Charlie for the first time, he went white as a sheet.

“It’s a good fucking thing you married a doctor,” he said, sitting heavily on the end of the couch, and then Charlie had to explain his slightly hysterical laughter.

Marnie visited, too, bringing by enough food to feed half a dozen families. She clucked over Charlie as though he were a rascally child, which he supposed was better than a lot of the alternatives. At her suggestion that Charlie go spend time in the barn to strengthen his immune system, Harvey’s entire face took on a look of alarm, and he showed her out as quickly as he could without being rude.

But there was one visit that didn’t go so well.

Maru arrived four days after he’d come home from the hospital, and almost before he saw her, Charlie knew something was wrong; it was as though she carried a thunderstorm into the house with her. He and Harvey had been having a leisurely little cuddle, his head in Harvey’s lap, when she knocked and entered without waiting for a response.

“Maru!” Charlie called, sitting up with difficulty. “It’s so good to see you!”

“Just let yourself in, I guess,” Harvey said, raising an eyebrow, and she jerked a thumb over her shoulder.

“Harvey,” she replied in a flat, cold tone, “out.” Harvey’s mouth dropped open in outrage, and Charlie’s stomach dropped. *Oh, shit.*

“I live here!” Harvey protested. “You can’t just—”

“Out,” she demanded again, and Harvey glanced down at Charlie. He offered his husband a feeble smile, waving toward the door.

“It’s okay, V. Mind checking that the sprinklers are running?” It was a flimsy excuse and they all knew it, but Harvey accepted it, throwing Maru a dark look as he walked past her.

“Don’t wear him out,” he warned her, and she flapped a hand impatiently toward the door. As soon as they were alone, she stalked into the middle of the living room, hands on her hips.

“I have asked you for *one* thing our entire friendship, Charlie,” she snapped. “What was it?”

“Cauliflower, I think,” Charlie tried to joke, but it was the wrong thing to say: she drew herself up taller, her scowl deepening.

“This isn’t *funny.* You promised you wouldn’t hurt him.”

“I didn’t—” Charlie, stung, didn’t know if he was going to say *I didn’t hurt him* or *I didn’t mean to,* but she cut him off in any case.

“You didn’t *see* him.”

“I was unconscious!”

“Exactly.” She sat down in one of the armchairs opposite the couch, leaning forward with her elbows on her knees. “Do you know that he cried while performing CPR on you? Do you know that he begged you not to leave him?”

Charlie felt it like a knife in his ribs. “Please, don’t—”

“No. Shut up. You need to hear this.” She pointed a finger at him, so incandescent with fury he almost physically felt it burning him. “You almost died, Charlie, and I think under any other doctor, you would have. You’re only still here because he couldn’t bear to let you go, and because you’re *extremely* lucky.”

“I know I am.”

“You don’t know the fucking half of it. Did he tell you how high your risk of brain damage was?”

Harvey had sort of glossed over that, in fact, and a chill ran down Charlie’s spine. “Not...exactly,” he hedged. Maru snorted.

“Look, you have to do better,” she said flatly, sitting back and crossing her arms over her chest. “I know you love him, but that isn’t good enough. You have to *think* about him. You’re not just some guy anymore, you’re his *family.* And you’re literally all he’s got. You can’t just fuck off and do whatever you want anymore.” She eyed him for a long moment, then blew out a sigh. “He doesn’t deserve to bury his husband at forty.”

Charlie’s painkillers were wearing off, and he was tired of being yelled at. He almost fired off a defensive retort, but then the pictures popped into his mind: Harvey sitting in the farmhouse, all alone except for Bones. A kids’ room that would never be used. Charlie’s side of the bed cold and empty, Harvey lying awake and staring into the dark.

For the first time, he didn’t just know what he had almost done to Harvey. He *understood.*

“Okay,” Charlie whispered, not trusting his voice. "You’re right.”

Maru glared at him a little longer; apparently, she was satisfied by whatever she saw in his face, because her expression softened. “For the record, I’m glad you didn’t die,” she said.

“Me, too.” He ventured a smile at her; she didn’t fully return it, but he thought he saw the corners of her mouth twitch upward. “Are we still friends?”

“You’re on friend probation. Don’t fuck up again for a while, and I’ll reinstate you.” She tilted her head toward the door, then gave a sigh of impatience. “Harvey! Just come in, I can

hear you lurking," she shouted. A moment later, the door creaked open and Harvey's head poked guiltily through.

"I'm not lurking," he insisted, though his blush said otherwise. "I *live* here."

"Sorry, but Charlie and I had to get some things straight." She stood, as Harvey crossed back to the couch. When he got within reach, Charlie tugged him back down and wrapped his arms around him, holding on as tightly as he could manage. Harvey looked bewildered by this sudden clinginess, but leaned into Charlie and stroked his hair.

"Have you been harassing my husband?" he asked Maru over Charlie's head.

"No," Charlie said, muffled into Harvey's shirt.

"Yes," Maru said, totally unrepentant. "It was medically necessary."

Weeks passed, long and frustrating weeks where Charlie mostly stayed in bed or puttered around the house. He was losing his mind with boredom; outside, the farm was coming back to life, but he was too weak and stiff to work it much. He *had* managed to convince Harvey that he could handle caring for the chickens, and so he spent more and more time with them while Harvey and Shane took care of the crops and larger animals. If his choices were between being cooped up in the house or literally cooped up, he'd take the chicken coop.

The day of the Flower Dance arrived. By some unspoken agreement, Charlie and Harvey had decided not to go. Charlie suspected Harvey thought he was still too weak, and while that wasn't exactly true, Charlie let him go on believing that. It was easier than the truth: Charlie wasn't ready to face the rest of his neighbors again. They all knew what had happened to him—hell, some of them had carried him into the clinic—but he didn't know what kind of reaction to expect. Would they think he was an idiot for having put himself in such danger, like Maru? Or would they be sympathetic about his injuries? Either option was equally intolerable. He didn't really feel that he deserved their sympathy (that, he felt, should belong to Harvey), and he knew he was an idiot without being told, thank you very much. Only a grade-A moron would *still* be feeling the familiar tug back to the mines, a tug he had to fight to ignore every day. He managed to resist for one reason, and one reason only: the memory of Harvey's face, red-eyed and tear-streaked, in his hospital room. Apparently his own self-preservation wasn't enough, but he could be stronger for Harvey, like Maru had demanded. He *had* to, because he'd promised not to go back in without him, and there was no fucking way he was going to bring the person he loved most in the world down into that hellhole.

While the rest of the village danced, he sat shirtless on the end of their bed, examining himself in the mirror. The stitches had come out weeks ago, and yesterday, Harvey had finally declared his ribs healed. All the bruising had vanished; all that was left of his Shadow Brute encounter was the gnarled, scar-covered mess of his left shoulder. He knew Harvey had done his best, and he was grateful. But bite wounds didn't heal gracefully, and hundreds of stitches later, he knew his shoulder would never look the same. He wasn't all that vain, really, but he disliked carrying around a reminder of how badly he'd fucked up.

“Is it still hurting you?” came Harvey’s voice from the doorway, and Charlie jumped a mile. He hadn’t realized he had an audience. Charlie quickly rearranged his face into a smile, reaching for his shirt.

“No, it’s doing great. Thanks to you,” he added, fishing his arms through the sleeves of his T-shirt. Harvey crossed the room, coming to stand in front of him. He’d just come in from checking on the crops, Charlie thought; he smelled good, like sun and hay. As he lifted his arms, preparing to pull the shirt over his head, Harvey put a gentle hand on his wrist. He lowered them again, giving Harvey a questioning look.

“Can I ask you something?” Harvey began, tracing a hand up Charlie’s forearm.

“Sure. What’s up?”

“Are you…” Harvey seemed to be struggling for words, and Charlie wondered where this could possibly be leading. If Harvey was this nervous, he doubted it was anywhere good. “You always cover it up whenever I come in,” Harvey continued, his voice quiet. “Do you know that? You haven’t taken your shirt off in front of me since your stitches came out.”

“Oh.” Charlie did know. It made him vaguely queasy to look at the wreck of his shoulder, and it was his *own* skin; he couldn’t imagine how it made Harvey feel. “Um. I...I know I’m not great to look at, lately. With…” He gestured at his shoulder, the corner of his mouth twisting up mirthlessly. “I do think it’ll get better,” he added hastily, not wanting Harvey to think he was ungrateful for all the work he’d done. “Eventually. I just didn’t really want you to have to see it in the meantime.”

Harvey blinked at him, his eyebrows drawing together. “You think that bothers me?”

“Well, I mean…” Charlie’s face burned; why was it hard to talk about this? He’d never been the shy one, he’d always been able to discuss these things before. Just like everything else, it seemed that expressing himself had become way harder since the incident. “I thought so, I guess? I mean.” His voice dropped to a whisper. They were getting uncomfortably close to the heart of his worries, now, and he could barely make himself voice them. He looked down at Harvey’s feet, rather than his face. “You’ve barely touched me since it happened. We haven’t...I assumed you weren’t interested. Because of this. Which is understandable.”

Harvey’s fingers threaded gently into his hair; when Charlie looked up, there was an unbearably sad expression on his face. “Charlie,” he said. “My love. No.”

“No?”

Harvey shook his head, and his hands slid to cup Charlie’s face. “I didn’t want to push you when you weren’t feeling well, honey. I knew you had to be in terrible pain. Did you honestly think I didn’t want you?”

“Well.” Charlie swallowed, suddenly feeling foolish and vulnerable. “Yes?”

“Listen to me, please.” Harvey trailed his hands down over Charlie’s shoulders, fingers ghosting over his skin; Charlie shivered, not unpleasantly. The doctor leaned in, murmuring

into Charlie's ear. "Charlie, you are the most beautiful thing I've ever seen. You always have been; there's never been a day I didn't want you, and there never will be."

Abruptly, Charlie's eyes stung. "But—" he tried, unsure what he meant to say.

"Our bodies are going to change. It happens. Maybe because of injury, maybe just because of age. But *nothing* could ever change how I see you." He pulled back a little, settling onto his knees on the floor. The movement put him at eye level with Charlie's shoulder. Slowly, deliberately, he leaned forward and brushed his lips over the worst of Charlie's scars. Charlie felt a shudder run through him, but when Harvey met his eyes with a questioning look, he shook his head tightly.

"It's okay. I'm okay."

Harvey bent his head again. He kissed his way across Charlie's shoulder with methodical slowness, covering every inch of his mangled skin. When he reached the outside edge, he kissed along the top, making his way back to Charlie's neck. Charlie gasped, tilting his head to the side, adrift in sensation. Harvey's mouth moved up under his jaw, then further back; he moved his lips against the shell of Charlie's ear. "I love you," he whispered, and Charlie felt it everywhere, "I want you, I always want you."

It was too much. Charlie didn't deserve it, not after everything he'd put Harvey through. But relief and need and lust filled him all the same, and he wrapped an arm around Harvey's shoulders, pulling him close. Harvey took his other hand, gently, and guided it down his body; he settled it against the front of his own jeans, letting Charlie feel the hardness of his arousal beneath them.

"Do you believe me now?" he murmured, grinding up a little into Charlie's hand. In response, Charlie turned his head and caught Harvey's mouth with his own. They'd kissed since returning home, of course, but not like *this,* not with this kind of devouring hunger behind it. Charlie had missed it a lot, but he still hadn't realized how much, not until this moment. Harvey climbed up onto the bed without breaking the kiss, straddling Charlie's lap; Charlie rocked up against him, pulling their hips together.

"Tell me if I'm hurting you," Harvey whispered between kisses, and Charlie gave a hurried nod. He honestly didn't think he'd notice if Harvey broke his ribs again, he needed him so badly. Desperate to touch more of him, Charlie tugged impatiently at the hem of Harvey's shirt. Harvey pulled it over his head and off, and before it had even hit the floor, Charlie's hands were sliding up his chest. *God,* he felt good. Charlie wanted everything, everywhere, but he already knew they were going to have to keep it simple. They were both too pent-up and needy for anything requiring a lot of preparation.

A graceful, steady hand splayed over Charlie's spine, and then he was being lowered carefully back against the bed. He let himself relax into it, his arms wound around Harvey's neck. Harvey followed him down, letting out a deep hum of contentment; Charlie slid his hands down Harvey's back to his ass, gripping it and pulling him closer. He was rewarded with a hitch in Harvey's breath, a sharp little exhale against his lips.

“I need you, V,” Charlie breathed, arching his back up off the bed. Harvey propped himself up with one arm, reaching down between them with the other; Charlie felt his pants being opened, his straining erection being pulled free. Before he could even ask, Harvey did the same for himself, and *oh,* that was divine. He kicked awkwardly at his pants, needing to come together with nothing in the way. Harvey gave a little laugh under his breath, taking a moment to sit back and toss all their remaining clothes to the floor.

“So impatient,” he said, smirking as he lowered himself back to Charlie’s body. Charlie hooked a heel over the small of his back, thrusting upward, and was satisfied at how quickly the smirk dropped off Harvey’s face.

“You have no idea,” Charlie growled, as Harvey gasped above him. He flung out his good arm, fumbling blindly with the nightstand; at last, he got the drawer open, retrieving the bottle of lube. He slicked both their cocks in a messy, uncoordinated way, too desperate to be careful about it. Harvey rolled their hips together, letting out a blissful moan.

“Yoba,” he sighed, setting up a rhythm. “It’s been so long.”

“So fucking long.”

“I won’t last.”

“Me, neither.” No matter how many times they had sex, Charlie was always amazed at how perfectly their bodies moved together. He didn’t know if it was skill, or chemistry, or just how fucking much he loved Harvey, but something about him set a fire in his blood like no one else ever had. Harvey felt incredible against him, and gazing up into his eyes, Charlie wondered how he could ever have had doubts: his husband’s arousal and adoration were written across his face, clear as day. He reached down between them, wrapping a hand around them both, and was rewarded with a broken noise from Harvey.

“Fuck, Charlie,” he ground out, picking up the pace. Harvey swearing never failed to send shivers down Charlie’s spine, and he felt the familiar tension building. He tightened his grip, hoping Harvey was as far along as he was.

“Baby, I— *ah* —”

“That’s it,” Harvey said, “show me, Charlie, come for me—”

Charlie did, spilling over his hand with Harvey’s name on his lips. He tossed his head back against the bed, arching his neck, and felt the orgasm flood through him with a relief so profound it almost hurt. All he could feel was Harvey: his hands braced on either side of Charlie’s shoulders, his legs pressing Charlie’s apart, his mouth on Charlie’s throat. He didn’t know how to express this overwhelming feeling; after all the pain and anguish they’d been through, Charlie finally felt like they’d made it home.

Harvey gasped against the underside of his jaw, bringing him back to earth. He let his own overstimulated cock slip from his hand, wrapping his fingers around Harvey’s as he reached the edge. “Char*lie,”* he cried, stretching out the second syllable into a long sound of pleasure, and then he was coming too. Charlie wished he could see his face, but he could read what

Harvey felt in the shuddering of his body, in the way his hands went under Charlie's shoulders and held him tight.

Charlie lost track of how long they lay there, boneless and sweaty. He felt a bit shaky; it was the most he'd exerted himself since the incident, even though Harvey had done nearly all of the work. Eventually, they rolled onto their sides, Charlie giving his shoulder what he hoped was a surreptitious stretch. Harvey's hands came up to frame his jaw again, and he leaned forward, pressing slow and gentle kisses all over Charlie's face: his forehead, his nose, his eyelids, his cheekbones. The tenderness made Charlie's chest ache, but for the first time in weeks, it was a good kind of ache.

"I didn't hurt you, did I?" Harvey murmured, still brushing lips against his skin; Charlie gave a minute shake of his head.

"You'd never hurt me."

"Mm. Not on purpose." He stroked a thumb over Charlie's cheekbone, gazing into his eyes. "I still feel bad about your poor ribs."

"Don't," Charlie said, and meant it. "I'm here with you. That's worth a few broken bones."

Harvey didn't respond, only trailed his fingers down Charlie's neck. He pressed gently in, feeling Charlie's heartbeat, just as he had on their first date. Charlie knew it beat slower now than it had that night. The rush of endorphins had faded, leaving him drowsy and pliable. But its beat was different in other ways, too. They'd looked at scans of Charlie's heart together while he was in the hospital, surveying the damage. Maybe Harvey had seen something in them, but Charlie had found them frustratingly inadequate. It just looked like a lump of tissue; if there was justice in the world, he thought, it should offer some visible proof of his devotion. They could do all the scans and stress tests and EKGs they liked. Charlie knew the truth: it beat for Harvey alone.

* * * * *

"Huh," Shane said aloud, the first morning he realized it. "Okay."

Depression: he had been carrying around its weight for so long, he'd never really believed it would be possible for him to escape it. Even as things had mostly improved for him over the last year, he'd still struggled against it. Working the fields at Charlie's for the last few weeks and keeping his Joja job had kept him so busy, he hadn't been able to think straight. But now, with Charlie looking after his own fields again and his exhaustion letting up, he realized the strange sensation he'd been feeling for a while now: he felt...kind of okay?

Shane had, all his life, treated happiness like a small wild animal. You couldn't predict its behavior, and the smallest wrong move could send it skittering away into the woods. He acted the same way now, afraid to look directly at it. But weeks came and went, and while he rarely felt all that *joyful,* he also didn't feel *sad.* It was a nice change. When he'd satisfied himself that it wasn't a quick flash in the pan, he tentatively started making some actual changes in his life. He started using the weights that had been collecting dust in the corner of his room for months. Sometimes he went for a run in the forest, although to call his panting

and stumbling *running* would be a stretch. He refilled his antidepressants without Harvey having to remind him. He stopped eating pizza by himself at two A.M., making an effort to have dinner with Marnie and Jas at least a couple times a week.

Then, something happened that he had long ago stopped expecting. One night, after a particularly long and enthusiastic session with Maru in the apartment above the clinic, he sat up and reached for his pants. And Maru rolled toward him, her eyes filled with a drowsy warmth that squeezed at his heart, and placed a hand on his arm.

"Stay," she murmured, and against his better judgment, he had. They spent the night wrapped in each other's arms, her head tucked under his chin, and he lay awake half the night thinking *maybe this is it.* Maybe he was actually turning into the fit, happy version of himself; maybe she was actually starting to see him as something more. He went to work exhausted the next day and spent the whole shift trying not to doze off against a stack of boxes, but it had still been one of the most exhilarating nights of his life. *Joyful:* was this what people meant? After his shift ended, he went home and smiled through dinner with Marnie and Jas. He played dolls with Jas, and then tucked her in, and then he did something he'd been thinking about for a long, long time: he dug through the bottom of his closet, found his old re-entry application to Zuzu University, filled it out, and sent it in.

"I think that was the best one yet," Maru said breathlessly, flinging her arms carelessly up above her head. Shane rolled to the side and flopped beside her, feeling utterly boneless and content. Outside the window, the sun had just begun to set, and it lit up the curves of Maru's body in pink and gold. He wished he could take a picture. (She wouldn't let him, would she? No. Probably dumb to ask.)

Maru's parents were gone for a few days, off to the Capitol for some kind of science convention, and she'd invited him to come stay with her while they were away. It was *almost* an ideal situation; it would have been perfect had they not been sharing the house with Sebastian—among others. Shane had been unsurprised to run into Abigail, wearing one of Sebastian's T-shirts and nothing else, late last night when he got up to piss. He had been *quite* surprised to also run into Sam, dressed only in his boxers. Both of them had blushed and scuttled back downstairs, and Shane had been left scratching his head for a while. *Huh,* he'd thought, *guess that makes sense,* and returned to bed.

Tonight, he'd walked straight to Maru's house from his Joja shift, and they'd gotten started the moment he walked in the door. Shane felt like he should probably have gotten used to her by now, almost a year into this thing between them. But he still wanted her as badly as ever, if not worse. He'd spent nearly an hour just kissing over every inch of her body, then burying his face between her legs, before at last sliding into her. He loved the sex—of course he did—but more than that, he loved that he could do this for her, that he could bring her pleasure while taking his own. They were so good together. He'd wondered if she thought so, too.

Apparently she did, going by her post-coital declaration. He rolled closer and kissed the side of her neck, and she gave a little hum of satisfaction. As it often did in these moments, his brain went stumbling down dangerous paths. What exactly, he wondered, was the difference between a relationship and what they were doing? He was sleeping in her bed, eating dinner

with her, touching her; why was she so reluctant to call it anything else, and why did Shane so desperately want her to?

But speaking of dinner: they hadn't eaten any before going at it, and Shane's stomach gave an indignant rumble. Maru laughed, patting it affectionately. "Is that so," she asked, grinning. "We'd better find some sustenance."

"Good idea." Slowly, they began to put themselves back together. Shane found his boxers under the bed and his shirt draped over her latest robot-in-progress; Maru extracted her bra from under her pillow. As he looked for his pants, Maru made a sound as though she'd just remembered something.

"Did you bring your alarm bot? I've got a firmware upgrade for him. I can start it downloading while we go eat."

"Oh, yeah. In my backpack," he said, gesturing vaguely as he pulled his runaway pants from under her desk. He heard her rifling around in his bag as he pulled them on. When he'd found his shoes, he spoke over his shoulder to her. "Is there food around here? Or do you think Seb ate it all? I can run to the Stardrop, or—"

"What is this?" came Maru's voice, her tone unreadable. Shane straightened up, sensing danger even if he didn't know why. When he turned around, Maru had the backpack in her lap and a piece of paper in her hand. What was—oh. Shit. There went his surprise.

"You weren't supposed to find that," he said, trying not to grin. But when Maru looked up at him, there was no hint of a smile anywhere on her face.

"You're going back to school?" she asked, turning the paper toward him. He felt his expression falter; she sounded kind of...betrayed?

"Um, sort of. I just got the acceptance yesterday."

"Were you…" Maru cleared her throat, looking down at the bed. "Were you planning on telling me?"

"Yeah, of course," Shane said, feeling off-balance. "I wanted to surprise you. I thought you'd be happy for me." He frowned, taking a few steps toward her. "I thought…" *I thought you'd be proud of me,* he wasn't quite pathetic enough to say.

"I am happy for you," she said quickly, but her tone was flat, hard.

"Really? You're not acting like it."

She gave a little huff of indignation, and Shane felt a spike of fear go through him. Something was wrong, why was she being like this? "I'm just *surprised.* You never even mentioned you were thinking about it."

"I didn't know if I'd get in."

"So now you're just going to move to the city, just like that?"

“What?” Shane didn’t know which part of that sentence to break down first. He actually *hadn’t* been planning to move to the city; he had been intending to take classes online first, to stay in Pelican Town and keep his job, but this threw him. “What are you talking about? Are you—do you not *want* me to go?”

“Go if you want to,” Maru said coldly, reaching for her shirt. “It doesn’t matter to me.”

This felt like a stab in the heart, but Shane’s own anger was rising now. “It doesn’t matter, or you’re happy for me? Which is it?”

She rolled her eyes, which only pissed him off more. “Shane—”

“No, I’m curious,” he interrupted, and he could feel his stupid nostrils flaring but he couldn’t stop it, “because it kind of seems like you’re upset that I might leave, but that doesn’t make any sense, because I’m not your *boyfriend,* am I?”

“That’s—don’t throw that at me, that’s not fair.”

“Fair,” Shane laughed, looking up at the ceiling. “We’re gonna talk about fair, now? I asked you out months ago, Maru. All you had to do was say yes, if you wanted to. You never even told me why not.”

Maru stood, yanking the hem of her shirt down roughly. “I said, I just wanted something casual, I didn’t want a relationship.”

“Okay. Fine. So why are you mad now?” She didn’t respond right away, and Shane decided to rip off his own scab, to hell with it. “I thought you’d want me to—be better,” he said, his voice dropping a little. “Improve myself, or whatever.”

“Is that why you’re doing this?” she asked, finally looking at him. “The working out, eating better, school, all that? So I’d change my mind?”

“I want to *get better,* Maru,” he argued, but he could feel his face burning. It was the truth—he *did* want to fix himself, he didn’t want to be forty years old and still working at JojaMart, out of shape and miserable—but the thought had crossed his mind, of course it had. In his mind, the fit, successful version of Shane had always had a better shot with her. “It’s not all about you.”

He could tell by her incredulous expression that she thought he was full of shit. “I never asked you to change for me!” she insisted, her hands balling into fists. “Is that what you thought, that I didn’t want to date you because—what, you weren’t *good* enough for me?”

“Well, I mean—” Shane’s throat felt suddenly tight. “I wasn’t, we both know that.”

“Do we,” Maru asked, her voice low and dangerous. But Shane was an idiot, so he barreled on anyway.

“Come on, Mar. You’re so—you’re so smart, and so beautiful. You’ve got so much potential, and—”

“Yoba!” she all but shrieked, loudly enough that Shane took a step backward. “I don’t want to hear about my fucking *potential,* not from you!” Shane was shocked into silence by this; she scrubbed her hands violently through her hair, making it stand up. “I can’t get through one day without somebody interrogating me about my *future.* My dad, my mom, Harvey, they all want me to figure out what I’m doing and where I’m going. They’re all just *shocked* I don’t have it all planned yet.”

“So—”

“I just wanted something to be *simple,* Shane,” she sighed, sounding defeated. “I just wanted to have a good time with you, and not think about the future for a while.”

Shane was silent for a long moment, processing this. It had honestly never occurred to him that being a genius didn’t automatically make everything easier; he’d assumed, with all the doors wide open to her, Maru could have anything she wanted. He hadn’t realized that too many open doors could be just as paralyzing as too many closed ones.

“I’ve *had* a good time,” Shane said, more gently. “The best. But...I’ve spent a long time, um, not thinking about the future. Being with you...it kinda made me want to.”

She just stared at him, her eyes wide and sad. Shane wished for a million things at once. He wished she could find something in him to love. He wished he could go back fifteen minutes in time and keep her from finding the letter, hang on to what they had for a little longer. He wished to be either stronger or weaker: strong enough not to want what he couldn’t have; weak enough not to do what he was about to. He took a deep breath, knowing how much he was going to hate himself when this was over.

“Look, Maru, I—I know I’m gonna regret this, but...I can’t do this anymore. The friends-with benefits thing.” He wanted to vomit. He wanted to scream.

“Why?” she asked, her voice barely above a whisper.

“You know why,” he said, and she just kept staring at him, like she didn’t know. “Don’t make me say it,” he pleaded. “Not if you know you’re not gonna say it back.”

There was a brief moment where he actually thought she might. Her body swayed toward him a little, and her lips parted, but then she closed them again and Shane felt a little piece of himself die. “It’s alright,” he managed, though it wasn’t. “I get it. I wouldn’t, either.”

Maru looked stricken. “Shane—”

“I gotta go. Okay? I’ll see you around.” He turned on his heel and stalked out her door, hands in his pockets, feeling nauseous and dangerously close to tears. He headed west, where the trees were thickest. The moment he made it around the bend in the path, he dropped into a crouch, hands fisted in his hair. Fuck, *fuck,* he needed a drink, his hands were shaking, he’d gotten rid of all the booze in the house, he was going to have to go to the Stardrop and everyone in town was going to watch him fuck it up again, Charlie was going to be so—

Charlie. With the last bit of willpower he had, Shane stood and set out for the farmhouse. He wasn't far, he could make it, he *could.* He walked as quickly as he could without flat-out running, fighting down the panic flooding his veins. The chimney came into view first, then the roof, then the trees were clearing and he could see the wraparound porch. He darted around to the front, barreling through the front door without even knocking. From the living room, Charlie and Harvey's startled heads popped up from behind the couch. For a moment, he had the horrified thought that he'd interrupted them doing it, but the TV and their clothes were both on; just cuddling during *Star Trek,* apparently. Nerds.

"Shane!" Charlie called, looking alarmed. "Are you o—"

"Listen," he barked, letting his momentum carry him straight into the living room and into an armchair. "Just—let me stay here for a while, okay? Don't let me—I can't—" He ground the heels of his hands into his eyes, gritting his teeth with frustration. "I need to just sit here with you guys for a while. Okay?"

"Shane," came Harvey's voice, gently. "Of course it's okay. Do you need anything?"

"No." Ugh, he was being an asshole. "Thank you," he added lamely.

"Do you want to talk about it?" Charlie asked.

"No." He could be an asshole to Charlie, and Charlie wouldn't care. Charlie was an asshole-friendly zone. Glancing out from behind his hands, he saw that they were both in their pajamas. Harvey's pants were, ridiculously, covered in little cartoon airplanes. Wasn't he like forty years old? The two of them looked at each other, and Shane got the sense that they were having one of those married-couple eye conversations. Finally, Charlie shrugged, picking up the remote.

"Let me know if you change your mind," he said simply. "Don't think we're letting you pick the show, though. This is a good episode."

Somehow or another, Shane wound up curled in the chair like an overgrown cat. He stared at the TV, barely blinking, but didn't absorb a moment of it; he was too far down the rabbit hole of his thoughts. Harvey and Charlie came and went, refilling drinks, letting Bones into the house. He let their occasional chatter wash over him like comforting white noise. Eventually, his adrenaline subsided, and instead of panic he was left with the more familiar misery. When the episode ended, Charlie started another one, and then another. At some point, Shane realized it was getting really late; tomorrow was Tuesday, Harvey would have to work at the clinic and Charlie would have to handle the farm himself, it was long past the time they normally would have gone to bed. But the two of them just sat on the couch, binge-watching *The Next Generation* and pretending everything about the situation was normal.

He almost got up and left. It was selfish, to sit here and disrupt their night. At the very least, he could have told them not to stay up with him. But a small part of him still felt the danger —still knew that Charlie had an entire shed full of wine, and Shane knew exactly how to get in—and so, to his burning shame, he kept quiet. Bones settled on the floor in front of him, and Shane let his arm dangle down, absently stroking his fur. It was nice, having an animal to pet. Soothing.

Shane didn't even realize he'd fallen asleep until he felt a hand gently shaking his shoulder. He cracked one eye to find Charlie, standing over him with a sad little smile. "Come on, dude," Charlie whispered, stepping back to give him room. "You can't sleep like that, you'll wreck your back."

"Nngh," Shane muttered, feeling very uninterested in moving, but then he stretched and felt what the position *was* doing to his back. "I'll go home," he said blearily.

"We're not kicking you out, dummy, we're just moving you over." Shane sat up, grimacing as his spine protested the sudden change; when his eyes focused, he saw Harvey, laying out a pillow and blanket on the couch. Shane kind of felt like crying again.

"You don't have to," he tried, and his throat closed around the rest of the sentence. Harvey smiled at him, then headed into the bedroom, leaving the two of them alone.

"I know." Charlie reached down and ruffled his hair, letting his hand rest on Shane's head for a moment. It should have been awkward, shouldn't have been comforting, and yet it was. Maybe Maru didn't love him, and maybe she never would. It hurt—a lot—but that didn't mean he was alone. Charlie had always cared. Harvey cared, too.

He shuffled up and out of the chair, settling back down on the couch. As he stretched out with his face in the pillow, he felt the blanket being tugged up over him, and then Charlie's footsteps were padding off into the bedroom. "Night," he called over his shoulder, and before he could even call out a response, Shane drifted off to sleep.

He was late to work the next morning. *Really* late, and he'd run three quarters of the way there before he realized he wasn't wearing his Joja uniform. Predictably, when he came through the doors, Morris was waiting for him. He stood with his hands on his hips, looking over his glasses like a disapproving Victorian schoolteacher.

"This is a very disappointing development, Shane," he said gravely, as though he were Shane's dad, as though his disappointment mattered at all. "I admit, I had hoped your work habits were improving. But maybe my faith in you was premature."

Suddenly, it all struck him as hilarious: that stupid outfit Morris always wore, the calculated pose, the tired lecture. He looked around the store, at the place he'd hated spending his days for more than two years now, and let out a laugh. Behind his dumb little glasses, Morris looked first shocked and then outraged.

"Do you think this is *funny?* Disciplinary action will—"

"Go fuck yourself, Morris," Shane interrupted him, grinning. The weight of his fight with Maru still pressed on him, but everything else seemed so simple—or it could be, if he just stopped overthinking it. "I quit. I'm going back to school."

Chapter End Notes

I was so happy to hear so many of you liked the chapter yesterday! It took a long time to write; I'm sure I messed up some of the medical stuff, but I tried to do my homework and not fall into too many bad TV hospital tropes. We've still got more comfort to get through, but most of the hurt is over (for now)!

Tomorrow: Harvey can't sleep. Something is weird in the woods. Charlie celebrates his belated birthday...with a little gift for Harvey.

Chapter 29: Summer, Year 3

Chapter Summary

Harvey can't sleep. Something is weird in the woods. Charlie celebrates his belated birthday...with a little gift for Harvey.

Chapter Notes

NSFW content ahead!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Charlie wasn’t sure what had woken him, at first. He blinked groggily, wanting to return to sleep but sure something was wrong. Squinting into the darkness, he made out the sleeping form of Bones, upside-down in his bed. Couldn’t be anything *too* wrong, then; Bones was always the first to alert them if something happened. “Are you awake, V?” he whispered, rolling over to check on Harvey. But then he realized what was different: Harvey wasn’t there.

He glanced at the bathroom door, but it was open, the light off. Well, that was weird. Gingerly, he pulled back the covers and got to his feet. His wounds had been healed for weeks now, but there was still an awful lingering tightness in his shoulder that he couldn’t seem to shake. He knew Harvey would have massaged it out for him, but he couldn’t bring himself to complain about it; he was always afraid to raise the subject of his near-death experience. Padding into the living room, he saw that the lights were off there, too. No one lay on the couch, and the kitchen was empty. As he crossed the stairwell, he saw a spill of light at the top. *The study,* he thought. He climbed the stairs as quietly as he could, not wanting to wake Harvey if he’d fallen asleep in one of the armchairs. But the study turned out to be empty, too. When Charlie saw where the light was coming from, he felt an ache deep in his chest.

Harvey sat on the toddler bed in the empty kids’ room, facing away from the door, his shoulders hunched and face in his hands. He’d left the overhead lights off, but the little dog-shaped lamp was on, outlining him in light. “Hi, honey,” Charlie said, as softly as he could.

Not softly enough; Harvey jumped, shoulders coming up around his ears, before turning toward the door. Charlie was alarmed to see that his eyes were red, his mouth downturned. “I didn’t think you’d wake up,” Harvey said, in a thick, hoarse voice.

“Darlin’. What happened?” Charlie asked, crossing the room. He climbed onto the bed beside Harvey and put an arm around him. Harvey didn’t lean into it like he usually did, but he didn’t pull away either, which Charlie decided to take as a good sign. Harvey lifted his glasses and scrubbed a hand across his eyes.

“Nightmare,” he said at last. *Three guesses what it was about,* Charlie thought savagely. He wanted to go back and punch past-Charlie in the face for the pain he’d caused this man.

“About…”

“Yeah.”

They sat quietly for a moment. Charlie didn’t know what to say. *Sorry I almost got myself killed for no reason* didn’t seem like the right thing for the moment, though he was; he would always be sorry for that. At last, Harvey took a deep breath.

“I keep seeing it,” he whispered, letting his glasses drop back into place in front of his closed eyes. “You, being carried in. All that blood. But...I can’t save you.”

“You did save me,” Charlie reminded him gently. Harvey turned toward him, and the look of anguish on his face made Charlie’s insides twist.

“It was so, so close.”

It had been nearly three months since the incident, and they’d made a lot of progress. They joked and talked and cuddled like they always had, and their sex life was almost totally back to normal. But, while this was the first time Charlie had found Harvey out of bed, he suspected it wasn’t the first time he’d been woken by nightmares. There were days where he walked around with dark circles under his eyes, when his smiles felt forced and his eyes seemed unfocused. Charlie was desperate to help him, but he didn’t know how.

“Not close enough,” Charlie whispered, and kissed him. Harvey made a soft, pained noise, but leaned into it; Charlie’s hands stroked through his hair, trying to offer comfort the only ways he could.

When he broke away, Charlie rested a hand on Harvey’s face, summoning his courage. “I want to talk to you about something,” he began, tentatively. “But...try not to be mad at me, okay?” Harvey stiffened, and Charlie instantly scrambled to put him at ease. “It’s not—I haven’t done anything dumb this time, I promise. It’s something else.”

“Okay,” Harvey said cautiously.

“I think it might be good for you to see a therapist,” Charlie ventured, cringing internally. There was no easy way to make that suggestion to someone, but he was more convinced by the day that Harvey needed help he couldn’t give. The nightmares were new, but Charlie also suspected there were other layers underneath that could use a professional examination: Harvey’s obviously low self-esteem, the marks left by the loneliness of his childhood, his jealousy issues. Charlie loved him fiercely, exactly as he was, but he wondered if Harvey

could be happier or more confident with some help. He deserved to be the happiest man on earth.

Harvey blew out a long, tired-sounding exhale. “I know.”

“You do?”

“Yeah.” He took Charlie’s left hand in both of his, twisting his wedding band idly. “I’m just...so scared, all the time. It’s stupid, but.” He shook his head, staring down at their hands. “I keep feeling like we got extra time, and at any moment, it could just...run out. I know that’s morbid.”

Charlie tried to ignore the chill this sent down his spine. It *was* morbid, which wasn’t like Harvey. Once again, he considered the unfairness of having spent hours in peaceful oblivion himself, while Harvey had to do all the fighting for the both of them. “You don’t need to worry about that, baby,” he protested, squeezing Harvey’s hand. “You fixed me right up. I’m totally healthy.”

Harvey looked at him then, one eyebrow coming up minutely. “Almost,” he said. “That shoulder still has a ways to go.”

“You can tell, huh?” He’d been dumb to think he was hiding it, apparently. Harvey knew his body better than anyone.

“Come here.” Harvey settled back against the headboard of the little bed, opening his legs and arms; Charlie turned and sat back against him, rolling his shoulders forward so Harvey could get at the sore one. As Harvey began kneading at it, he felt a strange combination of shame and gratitude. It really did help, the tension loosening almost immediately.

He thought about expressing this to Harvey, how he could hardly bear to ask his long-suffering husband for anything else, but they’d been over that enough times for the moment. Instead, he asked quietly, “Why are you in here, darlin’?”

Harvey was silent for a long moment, working Charlie’s shoulder in slow, rhythmic circles. “I come in here sometimes when I get—overwhelmed,” he said haltingly. “It can help, sometimes, to try and think about the future, instead of the past. Or what the future might be, anyway.”

It made sense, but the amount of hedging in that speech was not exactly reassuring. “Did it help tonight?”

Harvey sighed. “Sometimes it makes it worse.”

“Not knowing if we’ll ever…”

“Yeah.”

Charlie thought about it too. Sometimes he wished they hadn’t rushed so much to set up a room for these imaginary kids, although he had to believe it had helped their case with the adoption worker. There were days when coming in and dusting the furniture felt like

preparation, like promise; there were days when it felt like role-playing a ridiculous fantasy. But he knew that his own impatience had nothing on Harvey's lifelong yearning for a family.

He leaned back, suddenly feeling much older than thirty. Harvey wrapped his long arms around him, and he let his eyes fall closed. Whatever else was going on, the simple comfort of his husband's embrace still warmed him to the core. "It's gonna happen," he said, willing them both to believe it. He felt Harvey's lips against his scarred shoulder, lingering there.

"I believe you," he whispered, and Charlie hoped he did.

Charlie had been excited to get back out in the forest. Felling trees for wood had never been his *favorite* activity—for one thing, he felt some degree of weird Seussian guilt left over from childhood—but the sun was shining these days, and it just felt good to get *out* again. A few experimental swings of his axe back on the farm had gone well, and so he'd decided to pack himself a snack and go replenish their woodpile while Harvey was wrapping up clinic duty.

The sun slanting through the trees brought Charlie a sense of peace he'd rarely been able to find since his stay in the hospital. To his extreme frustration, he still felt the old pull toward the mines at nearly all times, and it was really starting to piss him off. But here, surrounded only by birdsong and shade and the sound of soft moss beneath his boots, he could ignore it a little easier. It wasn't so hot in here, either, without the blinding sun beating down on him. His Rambo days were behind him, at least for this year; Harvey had given him a litany of warnings about letting his freshly-healed skin get sunburned, so he was trapped in a shirt for the time being.

Charlie stopped to peer at a young tree, poking up through the leaf litter. He remembered this one; it had been a tiny seedling when he'd first visited this forest two years ago, and he'd taken notice of it because of its strangely twisted shape. It looked almost as though someone had trained it to grow in a helix. Now, the same tree came up to his waist. Jesus, had he really been in the Valley that long? Two years had flown by in what felt like no time at all. Still, when he looked back at his life two years ago, he could hardly believe how much had changed. Hell, even in just the last year: he'd gone from six chickens and one dog to seven chickens, one dog, two cows, one goat, one sheep, and one husband. He tried to remember what had happened during his last year at Joja, and he came up with nothing but a big *footage not found.*

He'd already decided he was going to take Harvey back to the Secret Woods for their first anniversary, just like they'd done on their first date. He had considered a trip out of town, but the long weeks in Zuzu City were still too fresh in his mind (and, he suspected, Harvey's). Maybe next year they'd revisit the Fern Islands, or finally check out the Calico Desert. For right now, he wanted to be at home, surrounded by their animals and plants and Harvey's model airplanes. And he wanted to do something nice for Harvey; the man had been caring for him nearly 24/7 since his injury, and now that he was feeling better, he wanted to repay the favor a little. Harvey could say Charlie didn't owe him anything, but Charlie still felt the imbalance between them, felt like he'd asked too much and offered too little in return.

Just past a fork in the path, Charlie saw a tree that looked about right: big enough to be worthwhile for the wood, not so huge he couldn't take it down. Settling his feet into the right stance, he took a swing at it—and instantly regretted it, the impact reverberating all the way up his arm and into his stiff shoulder. "Fuck!" he shouted, dropping the axe handle as though it had burned him. He gritted his teeth, rubbing at the muscle and wondering when the hell he was finally going to start feeling like himself again. All his months of getting in shape, all his hard-won strength, had disappeared in one moment of stupidity.

He wrenched the axe from the tree, feeling impotent and frustrated and generally kind of pissy. As the blade came free, a shower of wood pulp came after it; Charlie leaned closer, squinting, and saw that the tree was rotting from the inside out. *Perfect.* He'd fucked up his shoulder for no reason, then—a rotten tree was useless to him. It was weird, he thought, to see a tree rotting in that way without any sign of termites or other pests. What would cause something like that? Maybe Linus would know.

Suddenly, Charlie didn't give a shit if his shoulder hurt. He'd already caused himself the pain, and he wanted something to show for it. He turned, lobbing the axe into a second tree as hard as he could with one hand. It sank into the wood with surprising ease, and before he'd even taken a closer look, he knew why. Sure enough, this one was rotting, too.

He turned slowly on the spot, squinting around. Now that he looked at it, both of the rotten trees *looked* sick. Their leaves were misshapen and stunted, their bark flaky and dry. And they weren't the only ones, not by a long shot. The whole western edge of the forest looked to be studded with dead or dying trees.

That seemed...not good?

A flash of bright color in the distance caught Charlie's eye, and he squinted against the low-hanging sun. Ah: the town's resident purple-haired weirdo was staring at him, weirdly, from just outside his weird tower.

(Well, he amended to himself, *one* of the town's purple-haired weirdos. Abigail did eat rocks, after all.)

Every possible name this man had offered for himself was ludicrous. He claimed that Rasmodius was his real name, but most of the villagers referred to him as just "the Wizard." (Charlie wasn't going to call him that. It wasn't like he could actually *do magic.)* He sometimes hung out with Marlon and the other *Monster Hunter* LARPers up in the Adventurers' Guild, which was where Charlie had met him. Charlie often forgot he existed, given that he'd seen the man all of three times in the two years he'd lived in Pelican Town.

Charlie gave a hesitant wave, less of a greeting and more of an *I see you, you staring freak,* but Rasmodius just turned and went into his tower. "Rude," Charlie muttered under his breath, shouldering his axe. He was distracted from the rudeness of his neighbor by the sudden chill that ran through him. Was there a cold breeze coming from somewhere? He felt goosebumps prickle his skin, in spite of the summer heat. Maybe it was time to go home.

Harvey was curled in a corner of the sofa in his sweatpants, nose deep in a book. When Charlie stepped into the room, he looked up, a smile unfurling across his face. “Oh, hello,” he said, setting his book aside and holding his arms open. Charlie went straight to him, toeing off his boots along the way, and found himself tugged down into his husband’s lap. Harvey tucked his head under Charlie’s chin, inhaling through his nose and making an appreciative little noise.

“Mm, you smell good,” he murmured, his arms tightening around Charlie’s waist. Charlie chuckled and squirmed a little, his hands threading into Harvey’s hair.

“Do I? What do I smell like?”

“Like outside. Summertime.” He tipped his head back and Charlie kissed him, lingering for a long moment. It all felt so *normal;* it was refreshing, after the weirdness and frustration of his afternoon. Harvey himself smelled a bit like the clinic: a faint antiseptic scent, clinging to his clothes and hair. Charlie didn’t think it should have been a comforting smell, but it was, for him.

“You seem happy,” Charlie said as they broke apart, smiling down at him. Harvey smoothed a hand up his spine, mirroring his expression.

“Just glad to see you,” he replied simply. “Missed you today.”

Briefly, Charlie wondered if he should tell Harvey about the forest: the pain in his shoulder, the dying trees, the weird, staring old man. It had all unsettled him a little bit, and maybe Harvey would know something about what was going on? But then Harvey settled back against the cushions, arms still wrapped around Charlie’s waist, and asked, “Comfy?” His expression was so relaxed, so contented, that Charlie couldn’t quite bear to bring up anything that might chase it away. It was probably nothing worth worrying him about, anyway.

“Sure am,” he said, cozying up against Harvey’s chest. “I’ve got the best seat in the house.”

* * * * *

It was like one of those middle school word problems: if Harvey has a therapist appointment once every two weeks in Zuzu City, and so does Shane, what are the odds that they’ll end up on the train together? About one in ten, Harvey thought, if you removed weekends from the equation. And yet, somehow it had never crossed his mind that it might happen.

Harvey liked Shane. Honestly, he did. But the two of them didn’t have a ton in common besides Charlie, and if he was *really* honest, he was still just the tiniest bit afraid of the man. He was just so surly; Harvey didn’t have that gift Charlie did, where he could cheerfully absorb Shane’s insults and hurl them right back at him. So when he boarded the train to find Shane already sitting halfway down the compartment, he froze for a moment. Oh, it was awkward. Should Harvey sit next to him? Should he pretend they weren’t both going to the same therapy practice? Would Shane even want Harvey to acknowledge his presence, since he was going somewhere kind of sensitive?

Shane looked up then, looking surprised for a fraction of a second before settling back into his usual sullen expression. “Hey, doc,” he called, and Harvey supposed that was that. He moved down the compartment, settling into a seat just across the aisle from Shane—close enough that they could talk, not so close that Shane would feel trapped.

“Hello, Shane. What brings you into the city?”

Shane snorted. “I think you know,” he said. “Are you…”

“The same, actually. Well. Not the same *doctor.* Just the same practice.”

“Ah.”

Silence. Awkward, awkward, *so* awkward. Why had Harvey thought he could make more than thirty seconds of conversation? This was why Shane was friends with *Charlie;* his husband could coax a friendly chat out of a brick wall, if he wanted to. The train blew its whistle, announcing their departure, and started to move. “How have you been?” Harvey tried, and then wanted to kick himself. Not even two weeks ago, Shane had burst into their house and flopped into a chair, fighting back tears and unwilling to talk. Harvey had his suspicions about what had caused that particular meltdown, but he wasn’t about to bring them up.

“I’m. Um.” Shane looked out the window rather than at Harvey. “Mixed bag, I guess.”

“I’m sorry. I didn’t think.”

“Don’t worry about it.” More silence, but before it had a chance to get really uncomfortable, Shane spoke again. “I didn’t know you were, uh. Doing this.”

“This is only my second appointment, actually. But it’s overdue.”

Shane finally turned to look at him, and Harvey remembered Charlie telling him that everything he felt showed on his face. He wondered if Shane could read him so easily. “Are you, uh—” Shane cleared his throat, looking embarrassed. “I never really asked you, after the whole Charlie...thing. Are you—doing okay?”

Harvey’s first impulse was, as always, to deflect any concern about himself. He was a doctor (he was *Shane’s* doctor, even); his own aches and pains would always come second to those of his patients. And Shane was his patient, whether or not they were in his office right now. But then he remembered how Shane had moved himself into the farmhouse without a second’s hesitation while they were away, how he had planted their crops and cared for their animals while still working his own job and helping Marnie with her ranch. It was an absurd amount of work for one person, and he’d done it without even being asked—and had never brought it up again, as though his helping Charlie and Harvey was a foregone conclusion. Shane had obviously been rattled by Charlie’s brush with death, too. Maybe they *should* talk about it.

(And oh, hell, Harvey had gotten very unprofessional about the lines between himself and his patients in the last few years, anyway. *Charlie* was his patient, after all, and Harvey regularly

did things to him that would earn him the stern disapproval of the medical board.)

“I’m working on being okay,” Harvey answered at last, feeling it was the most honest answer he could give. “Thank you for asking.” Shane gave a nod of acknowledgement, and Harvey decided to press his luck. “Are you?”

“Am I okay?” Shane sighed, fiddling with the cuffs of his hoodie. “I don’t know. Mostly, I guess. Things are...I’m working on it, too,” he finished.

Harvey was pleased; he’d gotten the beginnings of a real answer, not just a deflection. Maybe they were finally getting somewhere. Belatedly, he remembered something they could talk about. “Charlie says you’re starting online classes,” he offered. “I think that’s great. Are you looking forward to getting started?”

It was the wrong thing to say, Harvey saw immediately, though he didn’t know why. Shane’s gaze dropped away, and the corners of his mouth turned down.

“Plans have changed,” he said. Harvey’s stomach dropped a few notches. Had Shane already given up on school? He’d just gotten his acceptance, from what Charlie had said. “I, um. I was gonna do the online thing, but...I don’t really have a good reason to stay in the Valley anymore.” He let out a long, slow exhale, scrubbing a hand over his face. “I’m not just going to my therapist. I’m looking for an apartment in the city. I decided to go back to school full-time.”

Oh. Harvey didn’t know how to feel about this. It seemed like the best possible thing for Shane, and Harvey was happy to see him taking such a big step. On the other hand, Charlie would be devastated, and Harvey had a keen interest in keeping Charlie as happy as possible at all times. On top of that, something about Shane’s wording stood out to him— *I don’t have a good reason to stay in the Valley anymore.* Harvey thought his suspicions were probably about to be confirmed.

“I’m happy for you,” Harvey said sincerely. “That’s a big step. We’re all going to miss you at home, though.”

Shane didn’t answer, just looked a thousand miles away. He didn’t wear the expression of someone excited to make a big life change. He looked, honestly, miserable. Harvey wondered exactly how much to pry. Would he make things better or worse if he voiced his thoughts? And what if he was wrong? He agonized for a moment, unsure, before asking himself what Charlie would do for Shane in this situation. And Charlie, he knew, would talk.

“If it helps at all,” he ventured, “Maru hasn’t seemed quite herself lately, either.”

That got a reaction. Shane straightened as though he’d been electrocuted, his head whipping around to fix Harvey with a wide-eyed stare. “You *knew?”* he demanded, and there was all the confirmation Harvey had needed.

“I didn’t, I only guessed.”

“How did you...why did you…”

“Well.” Harvey began ticking things off on his fingers. “I had thought Maru seemed happier these last few months, but I wasn’t sure why, or if I was imagining things. But the day after you stayed over at our house, she was obviously upset, and wouldn’t tell me the reason. The timing seemed suspicious.” He eyed Shane, feeling his face turn slightly pink. “And of course, someone has been in my old apartment at least a few times. I assumed it was Maru, but I didn’t entirely realize she was, er…”

“Yoba almighty,” Shane groaned, burying his face in his hands. “I didn’t know you still went up there.”

“I keep some extra clothes there in case I get something on mine during the day.”

“Oh, no.”

“You two covered your tracks well, I’ll give you that.”

“How did you know?” Shane asked, still muffled behind his hands. Harvey fought not to laugh; he did feel bad for Shane, but it was nice not to be the mortified party for once.

“Maru's a good nurse, but *nobody* makes a bed like someone who went to both boarding school and medical school. They call them hospital corners for a reason, you know.”

“Oh, no, no. Shit.” Shane lifted his face from his hands, flaming red from his hairline to his shirt collar. “Yoba, Harvey, I’m sorry, I didn’t—we shouldn’t have—”

“Shane,” he interrupted gently, “it’s all right. Really.” Shane looked dubious at this, and Harvey pressed on. “I know neither of you have privacy at home, and it’s not like I was using it. I did tell her she could use it when she needed it, after all.”

Shane flopped back against the seat with a sigh, some of the red receding from his face. “Well, this got ten thousand times more awkward than I thought it would,” he said.

“And to think, I was worried we wouldn’t have anything to talk about,” Harvey agreed. They glanced at each other, Harvey fighting back a smile, and then all at once they burst out laughing. Harvey could hardly catch his breath, tears coming to his eyes. Shane tilted his head back on the top edge of the seat, still chuckling, and shook it slowly from side to side.

“Ah, fuck,” he sighed. “You’re a really nice guy, Harvey. Thanks.” Harvey hummed in acknowledgement, and Shane seemed to sober up, gazing at the ceiling of the compartment. “You don’t have to worry about that anymore,” he said. “She doesn’t...we’re not together. Well, we never really were, but—we’re *really* not, now.”

We never really were. Harvey wondered how true that was, remembering days when Maru had come to work humming, smiling at nothing as she filed paperwork. But he knew her, knew how steadfastly she refused to commit to anything long-term in her life. She wouldn’t even talk about the future with *him,* and they had to kill hours at a time together sitting around the clinic. He could see it, Shane trying to get closer and Maru pulling away.

Still: it was her life. It wasn’t up to Harvey what she did with it.

“I’m sorry to hear that, Shane,” he said, wishing he had something better to offer. Although...maybe he did, if he could handle a moment of potential awkwardness. Of course, he was used to being awkward, so what the hell. “I...look, I know this might be a strange thing for one friend to say to another, but...I’m proud of you.” Shane tipped his head to look at him, surprise written across his features, and Harvey pushed on. “The changes you’ve made over the last, what, year and a half? They aren’t easy changes to make, and you’ve done so well. I really admire you for all the work you’ve done.”

Shane blinked at him for a long moment, during which Harvey cursed himself for having underestimated the awkwardness factor for the second time in one conversation. “Thanks for the pep talk, Dad,” he said at last, and Harvey had one moment of real offense before realizing Shane was smiling. He rolled his eyes, mirroring Shane’s smile with his own; then Shane cleared his throat. “I mean it,” he added, with less acid in his tone. “Thanks.”

“You’re welcome, Shane.”

“While you’re being all nice, want to break the news to Charlie? About me moving?”

“Not a chance.”

“Eh, worth a shot.”

“God, V,” Charlie slurred, catching Harvey’s face between his hands; he used perhaps just a little more force than necessary, knocking Harvey’s glasses askew. “You’re so, so beautiful. Why are you so beautiful?”

“I think the number of shots you’ve done might be working in my favor,” Harvey joked, but Charlie shook his head in a very solemn way. He also shook *Harvey’s* head, with his hands.

“I always think so. Always. Look at your *eyes.”* He leaned in, very close, and in spite of the tequila on his breath Harvey really wanted to kiss him. Charlie searched his eyes from inches away, pinning Harvey in place. “They’re so *green.”*

“For the love of Yoba, please go in the storeroom like civilized people if you’re gonna make out,” Shane called from his perch on the edge of the pool table. Harvey flushed pink at this, but Charlie didn’t even seem to notice someone was speaking to him; he stared so unabashedly at Harvey’s mouth that Harvey thought they were likely to disappoint Shane very soon.

Charlie had missed his thirtieth birthday. Well: not *missed* it, Harvey supposed, it had *happened.* But it had happened while Charlie was lying in a hospital bed in Zuzu City, floating in and out of consciousness. And for once, Harvey had been really prepared for it. He’d set up a surprise party at the Stardrop, invited the entire village to attend, planned a menu with Gus, even plotted how he would get Charlie there. But then, of course, all Harvey’s plans had been put on hold. (Almost permanently, a thought that still woke him sweating in the middle of the night—though he hoped his therapy sessions would help with that soon.)

Things were more or less back to normal this summer, though, and what was more surprising than a surprise party months later? And Charlie needed cheering up; the news of Shane's impending move had gone over about as well as Harvey had expected. So Harvey had spoken to Gus, spread word around the village again, and generally rallied the troops for a second try at Charlie's party. All things considered, it had been a smashing success thus far. Nearly the whole village had showed up (Linus hadn't, and neither had the Wizard or the old-timers from the Adventurers' Guild, though Harvey thought that was to be expected). Charlie had been toasted over and over again, and not wanting to be rude, he'd accepted all the drinks sent his way. Which had led to their current position: Harvey, sober and pinned up against the wall; Charlie, drunk and amorous and apparently intent on climbing Harvey like a tree.

"Are you having fun?" Charlie asked, still holding Harvey's face in his hands. Harvey offered a smile, stroking a hand down his side.

"Of course. Are you?"

"It's not." Charlie hiccuped a little, trying again. "It's not too much for you?"

Harvey's brow furrowed in confusion. "Is what too much for me?"

"This." Charlie gestured expansively, pinwheeling an arm behind him at the rest of the room. Shane played pool with Sebastian, Sam and Abigail; Gus led Marnie, Lewis, and a shockingly drunk Pierre in a karaoke rendition of a pop song Harvey didn't recognize; Emily laughed uproariously at a story Alex and Haley were telling. And that wasn't even half the crowd. It *was* a lot, honestly. Harvey didn't usually enjoy parties much, and he was moved that Charlie would worry about him even when he'd been drinking, but he needed to set the record straight.

"Sunflower," he said gently, "not when it's for you. Please don't worry about me. I want you to enjoy your party."

Charlie went starry-eyed at that, his smile lopsided but still breathtaking. Very carefully, he went up on his tiptoes and placed a kiss on Harvey's mouth, lingering there for just a moment. Harvey's heart skipped in his chest, and he marveled at how such a simple gesture could still get to him, nearly two years into their relationship. He hoped he never got used to it.

"Farmer Charlie!" bellowed Pierre from across the room, breaking the moment, and they both turned to see him red-faced and waving a microphone. "You're up!"

Charlie raised an eyebrow at Harvey. "I don't really do karaoke," he said.

"Maybe it'll be your new thing in your thirties."

Charlie acquiesced, towing Harvey along after him as he crossed the room. *"Thirties,"* he repeated, in a tone of disbelief. "I can't believe it. I'm so *old."*

"Your husband is forty," Harvey pointed out dryly. Charlie flapped a hand, as though this were utterly irrelevant.

“And getting hotter every day.”

Harvey huffed a laugh, not even bothering to dignify this with a response. Charlie was *very* drunk, after all. He might be kind enough to overlook Harvey’s age—he pretended not to notice the crows’ feet at the corners of Harvey’s eyes, the “eleven” deepening between his eyebrows—but they both knew he wasn’t getting any younger.

Often, Harvey wished he’d met Charlie sooner in life, but then he remembered that their age difference would have been problematic if they’d met much younger. It didn’t feel strange at forty and thirty, and it hadn’t felt strange at thirty-eight and twenty-eight, when they’d met. (Harvey had fretted about it a little at first, but Harvey fretted about everything, and Charlie hadn’t cared at all.) And, okay, probably no one would have batted much of an eye at thirty-five and twenty-five. But if Harvey found himself wishing he’d met Charlie rather than Philip—hadn’t wasted all those years—he realized he was twenty-seven when he’d met Philip, and that would have made Charlie…

Well. That was gross, and something Harvey preferred not to think about too hard.

All things considered, though, Harvey was glad to be where he was. He’d spent his mid-twenties, supposedly the “prime of his life,” mired in med school and then languishing away in a bad relationship. In his forties, he had a home, friends, fulfilling work, and more love than he could possibly deserve. Maybe he was a late bloomer, but his life had opened up all the more beautifully for having taken its time.

Charlie drunk in the saloon was amusing. Charlie drunk in the passenger seat of Pierre’s car was a *menace to public safety.*

Too drunk to walk home, he’d tried clambering straight over the center console and into Harvey’s lap the moment their doors were closed. Harvey had managed to wrangle him back into his seat, keeping him in place through the devious magic of seatbelts, and started down the road home. It was a short trip, only a few minutes; surely Charlie couldn’t cause too much havoc before they reached the farm. Pierre had been more than happy to lend Harvey his car, although Harvey suspected he could have successfully asked for the deed to Pierre’s house in the state the grocer was in.

Charlie wrestled fruitlessly with his seatbelt while Harvey drove, and Harvey gave up trying to stop him once it became clear Charlie wasn’t going to win the battle. He slumped against the seat in defeat, huffing a dramatic sigh that blew his curls away from his forehead. “You’re so far away,” he complained. Harvey couldn’t fight back his grin, keeping his eyes on the road.

“Not for long, my love.”

Being a responsible, focused driver, Harvey didn’t notice the hand snaking over the center console until it settled on his thigh. Well, that was cute; it was a short drive, but they could still hold hands, if Charlie was feeling lonely on the other side of the—

The hand slid suddenly up Harvey's leg, cupping him through his pants, and Harvey let out a yelp as he swerved. "Yoba, Charlie!" he gasped, white-knuckling the steering wheel. Fortunately, nobody else ever drove this road, except presumably Lewis on his four A.M. shipping runs. "I'm driving!"

"I know," Charlie purred in a voice that couldn't possibly bode well, and then Harvey heard the ominous *click* of a seatbelt coming undone. Before he entirely knew what was happening, Charlie had leaned over the center console, dropping face-down into Harvey's lap.

"Oh, my— *Charlie*— are you crazy?!" Harvey demanded, doing his best to keep the car moving in a straight line. It felt like an impossible task, with Charlie's breath hot over his inseam. "I'm—it's—we're in a moving car! Not even *our* car!"

"Do you want me to stop?" Charlie asked, and even without looking down Harvey could picture his face: all wide-eyed innocence, as though he had no idea what he was doing. *Want* was the wrong word; Harvey didn't *want* him to stop, not at all. But he also didn't want to crash them into a tree, particularly in a borrowed car. He gritted his teeth, agonized with indecision, and squinted through the windshield. Up ahead, he could just barely see the porch light on the farmhouse, glinting through the trees.

"Thirty seconds," he said desperately, "we'll be home in thirty seconds, and you can do whatever you want to me—"

"Whatever I want?" Charlie repeated delightedly, and Harvey wondered if he would live to regret that promise. Maybe, if he could get the car in park and get Charlie inside before he killed them both. Driving was becoming increasingly difficult, as the blood left his legs and his brain and pooled somewhere in between. He desperately wanted to adjust himself in his pants, but Charlie's head was in the way, and anyway he was afraid to take a hand off the wheel. He was barely managing with both.

Charlie stayed where he was, nuzzling at the inside of Harvey's clothed thigh, and finally *finally* Harvey lurched the car to an inelegant stop in front of the farmhouse. He'd fully intended to get his incorrigible husband inside, carrying him if need be, but that plan went to hell when Charlie opened his pants and pulled his aching dick free. Harvey let out a strangled noise, still clutching the steering wheel like a lifeline. "It's—it's not our car," he tried feebly, one last time. Charlie looked up at him, and without the need to watch the road, Harvey was finally free to look down; the sight of Charlie's smirking mouth hovering millimeters from his erection, his eyes dark and burning, made Harvey weak in the knees.

"Up to you," Charlie whispered, the *p* sending a little puff of warm breath over the head of Harvey's cock, and that was it. Harvey fisted a hand in Charlie's curls—just shy of forcefully, the way Charlie liked it—and thrust up into that waiting mouth. Charlie moaned around him, eyes falling shut, and set to work. It was one of his messier blowjobs, the alcohol stifling Charlie's usual finesse, but he more than made up for it in enthusiasm. And for Harvey's part, the slightly illicit setting—with Charlie drunk and insatiable, outdoors, in someone else's car—had him shamefully, blindingly aroused.

Harvey came in Charlie's eager mouth barely two minutes in, stifling his shouts of pleasure with his own hand. He would have been embarrassed about going off so quickly, but he

wasn’t entirely sure Charlie had really noticed the timeline. Even after he’d spilled his last drop, Charlie kept gently sucking at him, as though he couldn’t bear to let Harvey go. When the stimulation became too much, he pushed gently at Charlie’s head, and his husband took the hint and sat up. His hair was mussed, his lips were swollen, and generally, he looked—well, as though he’d been giving someone enthusiastic head in a car. Harvey leaned in to kiss him, tasting himself on Charlie’s tongue (something that never failed to turn him on a little, even when he was totally spent).

“You are *trouble,”* Harvey whispered against his mouth, and Charlie grinned lazily. “I can’t believe you did that.”

“I know. What are you ever going to do with me?” Charlie drawled. Harvey pulled back, unbuckling his own seatbelt and zipping his pants back up.

“I have a few ideas. Let’s get you inside, and I’ll show you.”

The moment Harvey got out of the car, he was accosted by an excited Bones, who had been heartlessly abandoned all evening. Harvey took a moment to crouch down and scratch him behind the ears, giving him some love and attention before he took Charlie inside. But when Harvey pulled open Charlie’s door thirty seconds later, he found that the tequila had finally caught up with him: Charlie dozed against the headrest, snoring lightly.

Well. So much for returning the favor.

Harvey wondered if Charlie had forgotten all about his own arousal, but as he manhandled his limp husband into piggy-back position to carry him into the house, it became obvious he hadn’t. “Rain check,” Charlie mumbled against his shoulder, and Harvey grinned.

“Anytime, sunflower. Time for bed.”

Chapter End Notes

Figured we'd end on some fun NSFW fluff, since things have been heavy around here lately. :)

Thanks for reading! All of your comments about Maru giving Charlie hell made me smile. We'll hear more from her soon.

Tomorrow: Charlie runs into Abigail—among others—in the Secret Woods. Shane packs up. Harvey makes a diagnosis. Maru takes a journey, in more ways than one.

Chapter 30: Summer, Year 3

Chapter Summary

> Charlie runs into Abigail—among others—in the Secret Woods. Shane packs up. Harvey makes a diagnosis. Maru takes a journey, in more ways than one.

Chapter Notes

> No content warnings for this chapter!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Some tasks on the farm were delightful, a daily reminder that Charlie had traded up in life when he'd left Joja: grooming the animals, harvesting pumpkins in the fall, tweaking his wine recipes. Some, on the other hand, were every bit as tedious as a day in a cubicle. And repairing fences fell firmly into the second category. Charlie hated repair work so badly that Harvey had learned to do it, but someone still had to chop the hardwood needed to make the repairs. And bless his heart, Charlie's gangly husband just didn't have enough muscle in his arms to get the job done. (He was getting better, though; Charlie saw his increased stamina out in the fields, and noticed the way his shirts had started fitting more tightly around his biceps. Charlie loved Harvey just as he was, noodle arms and all, but he couldn't deny it was awfully sexy to watch him getting in shape.)

The only place nearby to get hardwood was the Secret Woods, and while Charlie was loath to disturb them much, he figured nobody would mind if he cleared out the occasional old stump. So, with several weeks of more successful tree-chopping under his belt, he headed through the little gap in the brush with his axe and a wagon to carry the wood in. Most of the stumps closer to the entrance, he'd cleared months ago (leaving the one he and Harvey liked to use as their impromptu table when they picnicked there). He headed for the shady back half of the clearing, toward the old statue and the pond. Things were starting to get pretty overgrown, he noticed; maybe he should prune the trees back a bit, keep the clearing tidy. He had no idea who or what the statue represented, but it had an odd dignity to it, a sense that someone should be taking care of it.

The wagon caught on a low-hanging branch, and Charlie dropped his axe to disentangle it, tugging and swearing. When at last it popped free, he turned around, reaching reflexively for his discarded axe without really looking at what he was doing. The tips of his fingers brushed something cold, gelatinous, and distinctly un-axe-like, and he jerked his hand back: a round green slime had settled on the handle, bouncing in preparation to strike.

“Fuck!” he barked, more annoyed than anything else; his fingertips burned, and while green slimes were the least caustic of the bunch, he knew that would be uncomfortable for days. Reaching for his belt, he whipped out his dagger and slashed at the slime right as it pounced. The creature popped like a little jelly balloon, splattering the ground beneath it with thick green fluid. *Gross.*

Cleaning his dagger off on the mossy ground, Charlie wondered about the slime. This wasn’t the first time he’d seen one in the Secret Woods, though it was uncommon. What could be attracting them there? Did they just get lost on their way from one dank hole in the ground to another, or were the Woods damp and dark enough to be a hot slime destination? It was really going to put a damper on his romantic picnics if he was constantly having to fend off malevolent balls of goo. He sheathed his dagger and picked up his axe, which fortunately hadn’t been spattered with slime blood, before turning back to the stump he’d set his sights on.

And then he let out a yell loud enough to send an entire flock of birds fleeing from the trees.

The slimes were *everywhere;* it was as though they’d been lurking behind the treeline, waiting for him to come further into the woods before revealing themselves. The entire clearing was rapidly filling with them, like a disgusting, squirming carpet. Charlie squinted across the gloom to the gap in the brush, but it was no good, there were at least two dozen slimes between himself and the entrance. Even on the off chance that he could fight his way through them, in such close quarters their blood was bound to spray him and burn him. As far as he could tell, there were only two options: Through or Up. And with Through looking less and less feasible, Up seemed like his only shot at making it through without losing half the skin on his legs.

Clipping his axe onto his backpack, Charlie abandoned his wagon and sprinted deeper into the woods. The forest was too dense in this area for him to have a hope of outrunning the things, but if he could put a little bit of distance between them, he might be able to hoist himself into a tree before they could pounce on him. Zigzagging between trunks, he found a waist-high branch that looked like it could support his weight. He swung himself up onto it, then scrambled up a few more branches; he was out of breath and out of practice, and wearing a heavy pack to boot, but the faint round scars on his calves were an excellent motivator. Once he thought he’d pulled himself up out of slime-hopping range, he looked down.

The entire path he’d just taken, probably twenty feet of ground, was densely packed with slimes. They rolled over each other, piling up and falling down again, surrounding his tree and trying to reach him. He’d never seen so many of them in one place; what the fuck was going on? If he left the Woods, would they just follow him? The last thing he wanted was to lure them onto the farm.

Well: one way to find out. He started gingerly picking his way across the forest, thanking his lucky stars that the trees grew so jumbled together here. Several times, he had to climb higher or lower to find a neighboring branch he could reach. The going was almost unbearably slow, and after fifteen minutes of work, he could still look back and see the tree he’d originally climbed. At this rate, he was going to miss dinner, and Harvey was going to worry. He’d

think Charlie had gone and got himself into trouble again, which was, you know, sort of true. Charlie cursed under his breath, scanning the forest floor again. If he could find some obstacle he could try to lose them, maybe a fallen log or—

A familiar noise reached his ears, the unmistakable sound of a sword slicing through jelly. Charlie's head whipped around, and though he couldn't see the source right away, he saw slime after slime go flying through the air in pieces. At last, the mystery swordsman made it through the thickest part of the trees—or rather, mystery swords *woman.* It was Abigail, hacking capably away at the river of slimes with a short sword. She wore rubber hip waders and a pair of elbow-length rubber gloves, and while the effect was ridiculous he had to admire her ingenuity. Slime blood splattered her left and right, but it couldn't reach her skin. Charlie was faintly surprised by all this. He'd known she was interested in fighting, and he'd seen her practicing in the graveyard sometimes (why the graveyard, he had no idea—just the aesthetic, he supposed), but he hadn't realized she had progressed to *actually* fighting monsters.

He wanted to call out to her, let her know he was there, but he was afraid to break her concentration and open her up to attack. But unexpectedly, news seemed to reach the front of the mob about what was going on at the back; in a rippling wave, the slimes all turned around and headed toward Abigail—and away from Charlie. He seized his opportunity, scrambling down out of the tree as quickly as he could. Hoisting his axe, he took a swing at the nearest cluster and reduced them to jelly. There was still plenty of burn risk, but with the trees breaking up the mass of slimes into smaller groups, he could be more strategic about how he attacked them.

Charlie had a few near-misses, jumping back out of the way as a slime pounced or a spray of fluid went awry, but he made his way through the mob mostly unscathed. A few droplets had burned through his sleeve and marred the toes of his boots by the time he got within shouting distance of Abigail, who looked shocked to see him.

"Charlie!" she called, performing a showy maneuver where she kicked a slime into the air and then sliced it neatly in half. "What are you doing here?"

"Same thing as you, looks like!" he called back, wrenching the blade of his axe out of the ground. The thing was crazy-annoying to fight with; he didn't know how Gimli did it. "We're almost through!"

They were; only a dozen or so slimes still bounced between himself and Abigail. As she raised her sword again, the slimes seemed to realize they were outmatched, and hurriedly scattered into the trees. "That's right, fuck off back to the mines!" Charlie shouted, and Abigail laughed. He caught his breath for a moment, adrenaline still coursing through his veins, and wiped the sweat from his forehead as Abigail approached. She looked totally unconcerned, covered in green viscera from the knees down.

"Where were you?" Abigail asked, flicking some stray jelly off her sword. "And why are you using that shitty axe? It's not even a war axe."

"I know it's not a war axe," Charlie said testily. "I came here to cut wood, and the damn things ambushed me. I had to climb a tree to get away from— *what?"*

Abigail was very obviously trying not to laugh, her entire face straining with the effort. “You climbed a tree to get away from some slimes?”

“Not *some* slimes! Like three hundred slimes! And I left my sword at home!”

“Well, that was a bad move,” she said airily. “These woods are always totally infested these days.”

“They are?” Charlie blinked; he supposed he hadn’t been back much since before the incident. “Wait, so you came after them on purpose?”

She tucked her hair behind her ear, blowing an errant strand out of her face. “Of course. They’re so easy, they’re great practice. As long as you don’t let them bleed on you.” She lifted one rubber-coated foot in demonstration, wiggling it back and forth before grimacing. “Although, I don’t know how I’m going to sneak these back into my house without my parents noticing. They’re a little... *gooier* than usual.”

Charlie checked his watch. It was just after five; they still had nearly an hour and a half until Harvey was due home. “Come with me. I’ve got a hose on the farm.”

With Abigail’s hosed-down hip waders and gloves drying in a pile on the porch, and Charlie’s burned and dirty clothes swapped out for fresh ones, the two of them settled at the farmhouse table with cold beers. “So you’re not just messing around in the graveyard anymore,” Charlie ventured. Abigail shook her head.

“That got old. I wanted to see what I could do against a *real* monster. If you can call slimes that,” she sniffed, rolling her eyes.

“Hey, some of the slimes down there in the mines can really fuck you up. Remember what happened to my legs a couple years back?”

“Yeah, yeah. I know. I’m ready, though. I want to fight something bigger.” She took a swallow of beer, giving him an assessing look over her bottle. “It’d be nice to have a partner to go with me.”

“Go? Go where?”

“Into the mines, duh! That’s where all the real action is. What do you say?”

Charlie felt perpetually three steps behind today. “To what?” he asked, uncomprehending. She huffed an impatient sigh.

“To coming with me! I know you’ve gotten pretty far down there, and you’re good with a sword. We could go adventuring together. That scoreboard on the wall at the Guild, I want to fill it up. And think how much cool stuff is down there, all the treasure, the—”

“Wait, wait, hang on, wait.” God, Charlie’s head was starting to ache. He put his beer down, rubbing at his temples tiredly. “That’s—I can’t—you know I literally almost died down there,

right? Like just recently?"

"But you'd have backup this time!"

"It's *so* dangerous down there, Abby. Honestly, it's kind of surprising I didn't get almost-killed sooner. Parts of it are on *actual fire,* and those monsters are not fucking around."

"Do you hear yourself?" Abigail demanded, leaning forward on her elbows. "That's so badass! That's what I want. And come on, you and I both know you want to go back."

He *did,* that was the horrible thing. Charlie still felt the pull, like an addiction he couldn't shake, and Abigail's needling wasn't helping his resolve. As he'd done every time the urge had threatened to overpower him, he called up the mental soundbite Maru had given him: *do you know that he cried giving you CPR? Do you know that he begged you not to leave him?* He thought about that, and about Harvey's face when Charlie had found him crying in their nonexistent children's room. It hurt him endlessly to remember, and it was about the only thing that could really break the spell. Taking a moment to compose himself, he straightened. "Listen," he said, more gently. "I can't just run off and do whatever I want anymore, okay? I have things to think about. I've got the farm, and Harvey, and he needs me. And we're trying to have—"

"Don't you think Dr. Harvey wants you to be happy?" she interrupted slyly, and Charlie felt a hot stab of anger.

"I want *him* to be happy," he countered, "and that means keeping myself *alive.* Come on, Abigail, I know you're not that selfish. Don't you think it would hurt Sebastian if you died? What about your parents?"

"Ugh, don't talk to me about my parents," she insisted, crossing her arms. "They want me to take over the *store.* I love fighting, and I'm good at it, and they don't care at all. Even Marlon and the other guys from the Guild, they don't take me seriously. I just want an *adventure,* Charlie."

Charlie thought back to his own adventures. Objectively, they had been pretty fucking cool. He'd fought living skeletons; he'd leapt over rivers of lava; he'd climbed through ice tunnels and found chests of ancient treasure. It was some real *Tomb Raider* shit, no longer just LARPing. He'd loved it, the thrill of discovery and danger thrumming through his veins, climbing back to the surface with a backpack rattling with gold and jewels. Pausing this mental movie on the heroic image of himself stabbing a skeleton through the eye socket, he took a moment to imagine his future, if he lived to see it: old and gray, settled against one end of the couch with Harvey against the other, their legs tangled together under a blanket as they read. Harvey looking up from his book at him, his face lined and hair silver but his eyes and smile just as warm as ever. Bones (the world's first immortal dog, obviously) curled up on his bed beside the fire. He weighed the two images against each other. Which one did he want more?

It wasn't even close.

“You have to make your own adventures, Abby,” he said at last. “Not all of them happen in the Guild. Take it from somebody who knows: you gotta appreciate the life you have, while you have it.”

Abigail frowned at him. “I have to say, I didn’t expect this from you,” she sighed. “I thought you’d get it.”

“I do get it,” he assured her, with a sad little smile. “It’s exciting, and it’s fun. But...there are more important things, for me, at least. That’s all.”

“Well.” Abigail downed the rest of her beer, then stood. “I’m disappointed. But if there’s really nothing I can say to convince you…”

“Afraid not.”

“Then I’ll get going. You probably need to get started cooking dinner, or something,” she said, a little pointedly, and Charlie pretended not to notice this dig at his domesticity.

“I do, actually. Thanks for helping me with those slimes earlier.” God, what was he going to say to Harvey about it? *Hi, honey, how was your day? I got chased up a tree by three hundred monsters but I really, really wasn’t looking for trouble this time.* Yeah, right. It didn't feel quite right, but since nothing bad had actually happened, *nothing* seemed like the safest option. The last thing Charlie wanted was to set off more of Harvey's nightmares, now that he was finally making progress on them. He stopped short of asking Abigail not to mention it to him; hoping she wouldn’t was one thing, but telling her to hide it felt like active deception. And that was a path he didn’t want to go down with the man he loved.

But domesticated or not, he was definitely going to start carrying his sword into the woods.

“What about this?” Charlie asked, holding up Shane’s old Joja polo shirt. Shane snorted, shaking his head.

“Fuck, no. Burn that thing.”

The two of them were seated cross-legged on the floor of Shane’s bedroom, surrounded by boxes. Most had been packed and sealed up already, prepped for Shane’s move back to Zuzu City; only a few stood open, waiting as Charlie dug through the bottom of Shane’s closet. Charlie tossed the shirt into one of the boxes bound for donation, then rummaged around in the closet again.

“Um. Looks like...a HyperMan action figure? Donate?”

“Are you fucking kidding? That’s limited edition. That shit is Jas’s college fund. It’s coming with me.”

“Fair enough.”

They packed in silence for a while. Charlie had always hated this part of a goodbye: plans had been set in motion, it was happening, but they hadn't ripped the Band-Aid off yet. It felt like running out the clock. He genuinely was happy for Shane, and knew he couldn't be anything less than his most enthusiastic supporter, but God, was it going to suck when he left. Charlie was trying to cover for his dread by being as chipper about the whole thing as possible. He wasn't sure how well it was working.

"Hey," Shane said abruptly, some time later. "Need you to do something for me."

"Okay? What's up?"

Shane sighed, turning over the tape gun in his hands. "The chickens," he said. "I can't take them with me, you know, not even Charlie. I...I know Marnie's gonna take care of them, but would you just...visit them sometimes? Just give them some attention?"

A lump came to Charlie's throat, and as with everything else in the past few weeks, he fought it back with all the cheerfulness he could muster. "Oh, yeah, of course! Happy to do it."

For some reason, Shane met this with a scowl. "Thanks," he muttered sullenly, and went back to taping up the nearest box in stony silence. Charlie wondered what he'd said wrong, but before he could ask, Shane turned back to him with an intake of breath. He opened his mouth, closed it, opened it again.

"You okay?" Charlie prompted, baffled.

"Are you even going to miss me? Like, at all?" Shane burst out, and then glowered down at his tape gun as though it had personally offended him. His shoulders had risen so far around his ears as to nearly swallow his neck. Charlie was completely taken aback.

"What? Of course I am! How can you even ask that?"

"You're just so fucking— *perky,"* Shane snapped, waving a hand at him as if to illustrate. "It seems like you're happy that I'm leaving."

Well, shit. So much for putting up a good front. Charlie sighed, raking a hand through his hair. "Shane," he said heavily, "of course I'm not happy."

Shane peered up cautiously from under his hair, which had flopped forward during his pout. "You're...not?"

"I'm sitting here listening to you talk about your chickens and trying not to cry, man. Of course I'm not happy. I'm kinda miserable, to be honest, but I'm happy *for you.* I was trying not to be a selfish asshole."

"Be a selfish asshole," Shane urged him, one corner of his mouth lifting. "The only thing worse than leaving is thinking nobody cares if I go."

"I care. You know I care."

“I know.” Shane let out a long, slow exhale. “Sorry. I’m kind of messed up right now. Not thinking real straight.”

“I guess you’re still not gonna tell me what happened,” Charlie ventured. Shane glanced at him, looking surprised.

“Harvey didn’t tell you?”

“No. Did you guys talk about it? He’s a steel trap, dude. He *never* tells a secret.” It was both one of the best and most maddening things about his husband. Charlie thought Shane looked impressed.

“I, um...Ah, fuck it.” Shane dropped the tape gun and flopped backward on his floor, staring at the ceiling. “It was Maru. We had a thing, not like a *real* thing, just like a sex thing. But I wanted it to be a real thing, and she didn’t.”

“Winter Star,” Charlie supplied, remembering.

“Yeah. I tried to ask her out. It didn’t go well, but...I didn’t end things, not then. Not until, um. That night. At your house.”

“I remember.”

Shane eyed him without turning his head. “Did you know?” he asked bluntly. “Harvey did.”

Charlie considered lying, but decided there was no point. “Yeah, kinda.”

“The fuck? How?”

“Aside from the fact that your free time suddenly got cut in half with no explanation, and so did hers? That,” Charlie said, jerking his thumb at the robot that still stood on Shane’s bedside table. “Maru obviously made it, and she always brags to me about the stuff she builds, but she didn’t say anything about it. So I figured it was a secret.”

Shane groaned, letting his eyes fall shut. “I keep thinking I should put it away,” he said. “Or throw it away, or drop it off at the clinic, or... *something.* I don’t know why I don’t just get rid of it.”

Charlie had a pretty good idea of why, but he wasn’t about to voice it to Shane. It didn’t sound like it would be a welcome topic of discussion. “Listen. Do you want to talk about it? Or do you want a change of subject?”

“Change of subject. Please.”

“Well. You’re not the *only* thing I’m going to miss.” Charlie nodded across the room at Shane’s MegaStation, which was still hooked up to the TV. “You and Abigail were my only video game access, and you’re bailing and she’s not talking to me.”

Shane sat up, grunting, and looked around. “We’re just about done,” he pointed out. “Think we’ve got time for a race or two.”

They settled in to one last round of *Faster Car 2,* and Charlie did his best to keep his car on the road as he let his thoughts wander. He knew this wasn't the end, not really. He and Shane were the kind of friends who would always be able to pick up where they'd left off. But it did still feel like the end of an era, the dissolution of the happy little bubble he'd lived in since moving to the Valley. No matter how idyllic it seemed, life still went on. Things changed; people moved.

The race ended (with Shane in first, and Charlie having managed to eke out third place by the skin of his teeth), and as if sensing his thoughts, Shane nudged Charlie with an elbow. "It's not forever," he promised. "I'll be back when I'm done. This is home now."

Charlie didn't trust his own voice, so he said nothing, just gave Shane a watery little smile. They sat in heavy silence for a moment, and then Shane gestured with the controller.

"Actually, why don't you hang onto this for me. I'm going to have classes and shit, I don't have time to be playing video games."

It was the most responsible thing Charlie had ever heard Shane say, and it almost sent him over the edge. "Thanks, man," he said, tracing a thumb over the D-pad. "We can play when you come home to visit."

"Yeah."

Four hours later, as Charlie and Harvey were getting ready for bed, a knock sounded at the front door. Harvey looked at him quizzically, but Charlie had been expecting this, and picked up a shopping bag on his way to answer it. Shane stood outside, hands shoved deep in his pockets and a look of embarrassment on his face.

"Actually—" he said, and Charlie grinned, handing over the bag containing Shane's MegaStation.

"Didn't bother unpacking it. I had a feeling."

"Thanks," Shane sighed, in a tone of deep relief, and scuttled back off into the night.

* * * * *

Harvey had dealt with problem employees before. In his practice in Zuzu City, he'd had a full staff of nurses, along with a full-time receptionist and Philip (who handled billing, mostly). It had been rare for any of them to slack off, but occasionally someone's work had turned sloppy or their punctuality had suffered, and Harvey had been the one to deal with it. It had been tricky enough to navigate the waters between "kind, understanding boss" and "effective manager" with people who had *only* worked for him. His current situation, though, he was finding impossible.

"Sorry, sorry," Maru blurted as she hurried through the door, disheveled and flustered. Her uniform shirt was buttoned wrong, there were dark circles under her eyes, and her hair was

flattened on one side. “I overslept, it won’t happen again.”

“It won’t?” Harvey asked tiredly, looking up from the paperwork he had spread out behind the desk. When ninety minutes of the work day had passed with no Maru in sight, he’d started updating patient records himself. “Because I’m pretty sure that’s the third time this month.”

“Come on, Harvey, cut me a break,” she pleaded. “I’m having trouble sleeping. I’m working on it.”

Honestly, it wasn’t the lateness that bothered Harvey. They’d had this issue before, occasionally. Maru went through phases where she had a flash of inspiration—a new robotics idea, a sudden fascination with a particular set of stars or chemical reactions—and worked through the night, coming in late and exhausted the next day. He’d never minded, though, and had never given her more than a token complaint about it. They both knew the clinic was her day job, not her passion; he didn’t need an assistant so badly he couldn’t get by without her for a few hours here and there.

But this was something different. There were none of the telltale signs of a creative burst, no pride or excitement or even impatience in her expression. If Maru had a tendency to burn the candle at both ends when something had grabbed her interest, this Maru was barely alight at all.

It wasn’t as though he hadn’t tried to get to the bottom of it. Over the last two months, he’d tried to draw her out at least once a week. There had been attempts to ask her outright if she was doing all right, efforts to distract her with an interesting book or article, even invitations for her to come over and spend time with him and Charlie on the farm. Anything to get her out of her room, he thought, but she had responded to everything with polite rejections.

“I don’t know what to do for her,” Harvey had confessed to Charlie, in bed together last week.

“Maybe she doesn’t want you to do anything.”

“Maybe not, but I hate seeing her this way.”

Charlie idly stroked a hand over his hair, humming thoughtfully. “What would you do if it was a medical problem?” he asked. “If you thought she was sick, and she didn’t want to tell you?”

Charlie sounded serious enough, so Harvey thought for a moment before responding. “I’d try to diagnose her,” he said slowly, “from what I could see without running any tests, and then I’d ask her directly about her symptoms. But I doubt she’d respond well to that approach for *this* kind of thing.”

Charlie shrugged. “Have you tried?”

And now it was five days later, and things didn’t seem to have improved with Maru at all. “We can discuss it later,” he said, in response to her excuse about insomnia. “For now, maybe

go take a look at yourself in the OR? You've got some, um…" He gestured at her misbuttoned shirt, and she glanced down at herself, looking mortified.

"Shit."

"It's all right, just...take a second, okay? Marnie's here in ten minutes."

Harvey kept Marnie waiting, pretending to get the exam room ready. In truth, the room had been ready since first thing this morning, but Marnie was an excellent catalyst for an experiment Harvey wanted to run. She and Maru always chatted like the oldest of friends; would Maru act like herself again in Marnie's presence, or would she stay withdrawn and distant? Unfortunately, in order to hear the results without polluting the sample, Harvey had to lie on the floor of the exam room with his ear pressed against the crack under the door. Science wasn't always dignified, he reflected.

"So how have you been, missy?" Marnie was asking, her usual boisterous self. "Feels like I haven't seen you in a while!"

"I'm well, and you?" Maru replied politely. Harvey frowned; that didn't bode well.

"Oh, just fine, more or less. We're missing Shane, you know, can't quite get used to all that empty space in the house, and it's an awful lot of work taking care of the place by myself, but Jas and I are just so proud of him, I just can't tell you. He sent me a photo of his apartment in Zuzu City, one moment, I'll dig it out—"

"I'm sorry, Marnie, but we're running a pretty tight schedule today. Let me go check and see if *Dr. Harvey is ready,"* Maru announced, her voice unnecessarily growing in volume toward the end of the sentence. Harvey scrambled to get up off the floor, perching himself on his stool and grabbing for Marnie's paperwork. He hitched a nonchalant expression onto his face just as Maru came through the door, glowering.

"Are you ready yet?" she hissed, hands on her hips. Harvey looked up, the picture of innocence, and tapped his papers.

"I was just reading up on her chart. You can send her in."

"Well, first of all, Marnie's the healthiest person in town, and you know it," Maru snapped. "Second, that's not even her chart. That's—wait, what is that?" she asked, tilting her head upside down in an effort to read it. Harvey glanced down, then reflexively flung the papers under his desk, flushing pink. The answer was that it was a list of possible baby names he'd been doodling on a spare manila folder, but Maru didn't need to know that.

"You're right, it's not." He coughed, clearing his throat. "May I have her chart, please?"

Maru deposited a folder into his hands, rolling her eyes before stalking back out of he office; a moment later, Marnie came in and settled herself on the table, still chattering away about Shane. And a moment after *that,* Harvey had to step out of the office again, because the chart

Maru had brought him still wasn't Marnie's. Distracted, she'd apparently grabbed the next one in the alphabet: her own.

Harvey watched Maru for the rest of the day, noting down signs and symptoms: nearly two hours late. Politely distant with even her closest friends. Completely unwilling to discuss, or even listen to discussion about, Shane. Distracted to the point of making mistakes. Lethargic, clearly exhausted, and impatient. Harvey had a diagnosis in mind, but the only second opinion he could trust was the patient's.

He decided to start gently. "You seem like you're having a rough day," he observed. "Something on your mind?"

Predictably, this went nowhere. "I'm fine," Maru said shortly, without looking up from her paperwork. "Just tired."

"You're welcome to go home, if you're not feeling well."

"I can manage."

"You're about due for a checkup, aren't you? Maybe we can figure out why you're not sleeping. Have you increased your caffeine intake lately?"

"No. Don't worry about it. I'm just working on some stuff."

"Oh, do you have a new project? What is it?"

"Robot stuff."

"What kind of robot?"

"What's with the fucking third degree, Harvey?" she finally burst out, standing up so quickly her chair rolled away. "I just don't feel like talking! Is that part of my job, that I have to talk to you all day?"

Harvey had provoked the reaction on purpose, but couldn't help feeling a little stung by this. "It never seemed to bother you before," he said. Maru seemed to wilt, rubbing a hand over her temples.

"I'm sorry. I'm being horrible. I don't know what's wrong with me."

They were silent for a long moment, Maru pretending to tidy up the office, Harvey considering his next move. Was it worth pushing her further? Should he back off for the day? Or—as Charlie had suggested—had the time finally come for a more direct approach?

He made his decision.

"Could this have anything to do with Shane moving away?" Harvey asked. Maru's head whipped around, and she stared at Harvey in surprise for a moment before sighing.

“Of course you knew.”

“He didn’t tell anyone, for what it’s worth. I guessed it on my own.” Maru didn’t respond, just stood there looking miserable, and he pressed a little more. “It’s okay to be sad about it, you know. And you don’t have to do it alone.” Maru turned abruptly toward the coffee pot, poking at it pointlessly.

“Don’t,” she said. “It doesn’t—I don’t—he wasn’t my boyfriend, it doesn’t make sense.”

“For you to miss him?”

She dropped her hands, tilting her head back to glare at the ceiling; Harvey couldn’t see her expression, but her whole body radiated sadness. “For me to wish I’d gone with him.”

Harvey stepped closer, resting a hand on her shoulder. “Why didn’t you?” he asked quietly. She turned toward him at last, a tortured expression on her face. It broke Harvey’s heart to see Maru looking that way; he’d never imagined it, not for a moment.

“We had a big fight,” she whispered. “I said...well. It doesn’t matter. I can’t just pack up and run off to the city. I have a life here, I have things to do. I can’t just drop everything.”

Harvey forgot, sometimes, that Maru—brilliant, sharp-witted, brave Maru—was still young, still inexperienced, and had been raised in a very small town. She had never been away from her family for more than a few days, had never spent longer than a week outside the comfortable confines of the Valley. For all her bluster, he knew this struggle had been going on inside her since long before Shane had arrived in town: her desire to spread her wings and try something new, versus the comfort and familiarity of staying at home. “I think you could, if you wanted to. What do *you* want, Maru?”

Her gaze slid to the side, and a tear spilled over onto her cheek; she brushed it away angrily, sniffling. “I don’t know.”

“Do you love him?” Harvey asked, and a muscle clenched in her jaw.

“Of course not.”

“Maru.”

“You know me, Harvey. I’m not wired like that.”

“You’re not one of your robots, so maybe stop worrying about how you’re wired,” he said dryly. “Listen. I can’t tell you how you should feel or what you should do. But I *can* tell you, if you love him and want to be with him, you shouldn’t throw that away. Being with Charlie is the best thing I’ve ever done in my life.”

Maru let out a little hiccup, rubbing both hands over her streaming eyes. “This isn’t—I didn’t expect this to happen.”

Harvey laughed, gently. “Oh, sweetheart. Nobody ever does. I certainly didn’t think I would ever start my mornings mucking cow stalls, but here we are.” The corner of Maru’s mouth

twitched, so he leaned in closer. “I bought a *straw hat* last week,” he whispered conspiratorially. She gave a watery laugh, looking up at him with eyes still brimming with tears.

“The things we do for love.”

“Understatement of the year.”

“I really might’ve fucked it all up,” she whispered back, and Harvey shook his head firmly.

“Not a chance. I know it.”

He could see her cracking, and he held his breath, waiting for her to decide. She shook her head at last, pushing her hair out of her face with a rueful smile. “I’d have to quit my job, though,” she said. “And I’m not sure I can do it. I love my boss too much.”

Harvey felt a pang of real sadness, but he pushed it away. He could mourn for their years working together later; there was something more important to do right now. Gently, he settled both of his hands on Maru’s shoulders, ducking his head to look her in the eye.

“Maru,” he said, fighting back a smile, “you’re fired.”

Maru laughed through a fresh wave of tears, and then she had thrown her arms around his middle, burying her face in his shirt as her shoulders shook. He wrapped his own arms around her, pressing his cheek to the top of her head, rocking her back and forth. They stayed like that for a long time, just letting their feelings out; Harvey was torn between happiness for Maru and the bittersweet knowledge that he and Charlie were both, in a sense, losing their best friends. They were going to have to start making trips to the city more often.

“So you approve, then,” Maru said, pulling back and wiping her eyes. “Of Shane.”

“Oh, of course not.”

“No?”

Harvey tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear. “Nobody could possibly deserve you,” he said, smiling, “but if you’re happy, I’m happy.”

She blew out a breath, her brow furrowed. “Happy will have to wait a few,” she said. “I have to go apologize first. And, oh, Yoba, tell my parents.”

“Well, let me know when you break the news. I’ll buy you a drink after. Or before. Or maybe both.”

“Definitely both.”

* * * * *

To Maru’s ears, the rap of her knuckles against the door of apartment 7B was the loudest sound she’d ever heard. She glanced instinctively up and down the hallway, sure that it would

have disturbed half the building, but no one appeared; the only sign of life was a muffled bass thumping from the apartment next to the stairs.

Well: almost the only sign of life. From behind the door of 7B, she heard hurried footsteps, followed by low swearing in Shane's voice. Her heart and stomach did some kind of complicated maneuver in tandem, and she nervously wrung the straps of her backpack.

"Hang on," Shane's voice shouted, getting closer, "coming, I couldn't find my cash—"

The door wrenched unceremoniously open, and there he was: shirtless, wearing only basketball shorts, and clutching a fistful of bills. The moment his eyes fell on Maru, his entire expression changed to one of shock.

"Oh," he said. "Um. Sorry. I thought you were...Chinese."

Maru stifled a totally inappropriate hysterical giggle, clearing her throat to cover it. "Sorry. I didn't bring any food."

"That's...okay." He went on staring at her a moment longer, and she stared back, suddenly forgetting every word she had prepared for this moment. She kind of wished he had more clothes on; her body remembered his *very* well, and his exposed chest wasn't helping her mental clarity. Her eyes fell to it, and Shane started, backing into the apartment. "Shit. I'm sorry. I don't have A/C, it's like a million degrees in here. Come in, just a sec." He left the door ajar, hurrying out of sight, and after a moment, Maru entered.

She looked around, turning slowly in place in the middle of the living room (which also seemed to be the kitchen and dining room). It was about the size of a postage stamp, the couch crowding right up against the refrigerator, and looked as though it had been inhabited for years rather than weeks. Clothes and textbooks were strewn over every horizontal surface, and a pile of MegaStation games had toppled over beneath the TV. She noted with relief that there were no bottles visible anywhere, even though Shane now lived alone. Nothing adorned the walls, but the one apparent attempt at decoration was a scraggly-looking plant in a pot on the windowsill. Its leaves blew gently in the breeze from the open window, and Maru saw that it was in bloom with tiny white flowers.

"Pepper plant," Shane announced, reentering from what must have been the bedroom with a T-shirt on. "Charlie made me bring it. It was a huge pain in the ass to carry on the train, and it doesn't ever make any peppers, but I guess it was nice of him."

"Sounds like Charlie," Maru agreed. "It's probably not getting pollinated. You can do it by hand, I could show you."

Shane blinked at her, stopping a good six feet away. "Is that why you're here?" he asked, and then turned red. "I mean—sorry. Not that...it's fine, that you came. I just. It's a long trip, to give me some houseplant tips."

Maru shook her head, the nervousness rising. "No. Can we…?" She gestured at the couch, the only seating in the room; Shane rushed to it and began pulling piles of junk to the floor.

“I wasn’t expecting—”

“It’s fine, Shane, seriously.”

They settled into the couch, at opposite ends, with one empty cushion of space between them: a burgundy corduroy no-man’s-land. Shane watched her expectantly, almost warily, and Maru took a deep breath. It was now or never.

“I came to apologize,” she said, eyes on the ugly sofa cushion. “For how I reacted when you got into school. It was—it *is*—a big deal, and I’m happy for you. Really, honestly. I, um...I don’t know if I have the right to be, but I’m proud of you.” She made herself look at him, and couldn’t read his expression; his brow was furrowed, the corners of his mouth slightly downturned. “I’m really, really glad that you went back to school, and I’m sorry I acted like such a dick when you told me. I just...didn’t want things to change, I guess.”

Shane nodded, looking down at his hands; he fiddled absently with a hangnail. “Thanks,” he said quietly. “That’s. Um. It’s nice to hear.”

Maru sighed, clutching her knees with both hands. This part was *really* going to suck. “And I wanted to apologize for—the rest of it, too.” His eyes snapped up to meet hers, looking startled, but Maru pushed on. “I know it was hurting you. Sleeping together, being like that, when you were wanting more. It was selfish of me, and I hope you can forgive—”

“No,” Shane blurted, and Maru’s stomach dropped into her shoes.

“No?”

“No. But not—it’s not what you think.” Shane leaned forward a little, his expression sad but his voice steady. “You don’t need to apologize for that. You were up front with me, you told me what you wanted. I made my choices. I could have stopped, but I thought...I decided it was better to have what I could, with you.”

“You deserved more,” Maru insisted, and Shane shook his head.

“I always felt lucky to get any of your time. You weren’t obligated to—well. To like me back. Okay? I’m sorry if I made you feel pressured. And I wish things had ended differently, and I —I forgive you for the other thing, but not for this. There’s nothing to forgive.”

Unexpectedly, Maru felt her eyes well up. “Shane—” she began, not sure what she was going to say, but then there was another knock at the door. Shane clapped a hand to his forehead, groaning.

“That actually *is* the food. One sec.”

While Shane hustled to the door with his fistful of bills, Maru took stock of her emotions. She still felt that she owed Shane more than he’d let her give, but something had loosened in her chest at his speech, something she didn’t know had been stuck. She’d been so ready for Shane to be wounded, defensive, angry; she had never considered that he might have made

his peace with the situation. She knew she had grown a lot over the past few months, but maybe they both had.

Shane thanked the delivery driver and closed the door, depositing the paper bag on his tiny square of kitchen counter. “Are you hungry?” he asked, gesturing toward the bag. “I always get enough for leftovers. We can share, if you want.”

“Thanks. Maybe in a little bit.” Even with half of the difficult conversation over, Maru wasn’t sure her stomach could handle the added pressure of noodles and sauce. Shane nodded and came back to the couch, settling into his spot once more.

“Look,” he said hesitantly, “it was nice of you, but you didn’t have to—to come all this way, just to apologize to me. I’m doing okay. I’m not just—”

“That’s not why I came,” Maru interrupted, and Shane’s eyebrows rose. “Well. That was *part* of it, I mean. But...mostly I came to bring you something.”

“Okay,” Shane said, a little warily. She supposed she couldn’t blame him; the only real gift she’d ever given him was a robot that tazed him every morning. Suddenly, it felt wrong to be sitting for this. She stood, pulling her backpack onto the couch, and dug around in it for a moment. The gift was wilted and flattened and generally the worse for wear, but she hoped he would understand the significance anyway. Turning back to him, she held it out: a bouquet of flowers, purchased from Pierre that morning.

It had come a long way to reach him. In every sense.

Shane stared at it for so long, she worried she’d given him a seizure; finally, he lifted his gaze to her face, eyes wide.

“The last time we talked,” she began, her voice trembling, oh *Yoba* how did people do this, “you told me there was something you didn’t want to say to me. Not unless I was going to say it back.” Shane exhaled sharply, but she went on. “I know it’s been months, but I...I’ve never stopped thinking about that. How it would have sounded if I’d let you say it. How it would have felt. I think about it all the time.

“I know things are different now. You have a whole new life. And I don’t know if there’s still room for me in it. If there isn’t, I understand. But if there is...I just wanted to ask you. If you would maybe say it now.” She swallowed, trying to smile through her nerves. “And I promise, I’d say it back.”

She barely had time to get this last sentence out before Shane had surged up off the couch, cupping the back of her head in one hand and kissing her. His other arm went around her waist, pulling them close together, and she threw her own arms around his neck. The relief was so powerful she felt light-headed; she kissed back with everything she felt, all the love and longing and heartache of the last few months. Maru didn’t know when her friendship with Shane had tipped over into something more. She was a logical and scientific person, and she based her decisions on concrete data: evidence and prior results. But, never having been in love before, her data points had failed her. It wasn’t very scientific, but then, even the most tightly controlled experiments could go awry.

He didn’t say it, or anything else, in that moment. But then, their mouths were otherwise occupied for a long time, and she wanted him too badly to interrupt the proceedings for more *talking*.

He said it later that night as they ate lukewarm Chinese food, half-dressed and cross-legged on his bed.

She said it too.

Chapter End Notes

I'm so happy you guys liked Maru and Shane so much! It's not a popular pairing, so when I started posting about them I wasn't sure how they would be received, but I really liked them together. I hope this chapter feels satisfying for them.

Just a heads up: tomorrow's chapter is LONG. Maybe the longest one yet? So when it hits your inbox, maybe get some water and a snack and settle somewhere comfy :) Stay hydrated, friends!

Tomorrow: Abigail makes an unwise decision, and Charlie faces one of his own.

Chapter 31: Summer, Year 3

Chapter Summary

Abigail makes an unwise decision, and Charlie faces one of his own.

Chapter Notes

A couple of content warnings for this chapter! There's going to be some violence (of the monster-fighting variety; I don't think it's that graphic, but your mileage may vary) along with some blood. Also some NSFW content, because why not. And finally, as promised yesterday, this one is LONG. See you in 10,500 words!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The sun crawled lazily through a cloudless sky, beating down on Charlie's back mercilessly as he picked blueberries. Normally he loved this particular harvest—if nothing else, for the payday that would come tomorrow—but in this relentless end-of-season heat, not a whisper of breeze, he was desperate to finish and get back into the shade. The animals watched him from beneath a scattering of trees, even Bones, too hot to move. He thought longingly of the clinic, of the cool tiles frosty with air-conditioning. Maybe he could go visit Harvey once he finished up...and cleaned up, he added mentally, catching a whiff of himself.

Distracted by thoughts of climate control and handsome doctors, he didn't hear the footsteps until they were nearly upon him: at least three sets of feet, running at top speed. He straightened up and turned to see Pierre, Caroline, and Linus barreling down the path, Pierre's car abandoned beside the house with all the doors flung open. As Bones leapt to his feet, barking in excitement, Charlie's stomach plummeted. He didn't think he'd ever seen any of them run before.

"Charlie!" Pierre shouted, clearly winded; the three of them skidded to a stop a few feet away, panting. Charlie came out from between the rows of berries, reaching to steady Caroline, who looked as though she might faint. "Oh, Yoba, Charlie, we need your help!"

"Okay, it's okay, what can I—"

"It's Abigail!" Caroline wailed, her face streaked with tears. "She—we had a fight about her swordfighting, and she left, and—she—" At this, Caroline dissolved into fresh sobs, falling into her husband's arms; Pierre was white as a sheet. Charlie turned to Linus, who looked worried, but still composed.

“I saw her,” he finished for Caroline, “entering the mines with a sword.”

Charlie’s stomach gave a little lurch, but he shook himself; now was not the time to get upset. “How long ago?”

“Thirty minutes or so,” Linus said, looking abashed for some reason. “I tried to follow her in, but...she went down pretty deep, and I wasn’t strong enough to make it through.” For the first time, Charlie noticed Linus’s face: one of his eyes was rapidly swelling, and there was a nasty graze on his cheek. He’d encountered something down there, then. Charlie was filled with a sudden surge of affection for Linus. The man might be odd, but he was brave, and a good friend.

“Abigail’s good with that sword, Caroline,” he said, heading quickly back up the path to his tool chest. They all fell in line behind him, Caroline still crying. “She’s going to be okay, I’d bet anything.” As Caroline hiccuped behind him, he rummaged through the chest, his fingers closing at last on the well-worn hilt of his sword. He straightened, strapping it to his backpack, and threw in his pickaxe for good measure. Tossing his straw hat into the chest, he returned to the group. Pierre was openly gaping at him.

“You’ll go?” he asked. “You’ll find her?”

“Of course I will, Pierre,” Charlie said, clapping a hand on his shoulder. “I’ll go right now, and I won’t come back without her.”

“Oh, Charlie,” Caroline sobbed, and threw her arms around him. He gave her a tight squeeze, then passed her back to her husband, disentangling himself as gently as he could.

“What floor, Linus?” he asked over Caroline’s shoulder. Linus’s face sagged.

“115,” Linus said, and Charlie turned cold all over. What was she *thinking?* Her first time in the mines, and she’d jumped right to the bottom? It was suicide; for the first time, Charlie worried whether Abigail was still alive. No time to wonder about it, though: there was a job to be done.

“Take my car,” Pierre urged, tossing him the keys.

“Linus, you should get that checked out,” Charlie said over his shoulder as he climbed into the car. “Go see—” All at once, Charlie remembered his promise: he’d sworn not to go into the mines without Harvey. But if he went and got him now, heading east into the square instead of north into the mountains, it would add at least ten minutes to his trip. Every minute Abigail spent down there was another potential encounter with a deadly monster. With a pang of regret, he threw his backpack into the passenger seat and spoke again.

“Go see Harvey,” he finished, “and tell him where I am, would you? Tell him...it was an emergency.” At Linus’s nod, Charlie slammed the car door, whipping it around and tearing off down the gravel road. *Please, Abigail, just hang on a little longer.*

His first thought upon arriving in the mine was that at least it was cool; his second was a horrible, sickening intensifying of the urge that had been calling him back to the mines for

months. He hadn't stopped feeling it since the winter, but now that he was *in* the mine, it was almost unbearable. As he waited for the ancient, rickety elevator to arrive, he steeled himself for the horrors of the lower floors. As far as he knew, that Shadow Brute was still alive and kicking; there were lava slimes everywhere, just waiting to burn the flesh off his legs, and any number of monsters he hadn't yet encountered. He hated to admit it, but he was afraid. His last trip down there had robbed him of the illusion that he was in no danger, and it all felt more real.

The doors slid open, and he hopped in, trying to quell his nerves. As it began the long descent, he happened to glance down, and saw that the floor was splotched with old, dried blood. Had some creature met its end in here? With a jolt, he realized the blood was most likely *his.* It seemed like a lot for a person to have lost. Yet again, he felt a fierce gratitude for Linus. Without his help, would Charlie even still be alive?

After what felt like an eternity, the elevator shuddered to a stop on Floor 115. Holding his sword at the ready, he stepped forward into the dim, sweltering cavern. Right away, he saw the evidence that someone had been here already—a few scorch marks on the ground indicated slimes that had been dispatched, and a crate in the corner had been broken open—but there was no one in sight. A heap of fabric on the ground several dozen yards into the floor made his blood run cold, but it was only his own discarded jacket; he tied it around his waist, trying not to notice the dried blood on it.

"Abigail," he hissed, as loudly as he dared—he didn't want to attract the attention of every fiend in a ten-floor radius. He waited, but no response came, and he tried a little louder. *"Abigail!"*

He heard a shifting sound to his left, and his heart leapt, but almost instantly it dropped again—that wasn't Abigail, it was a thing Krobus had called a Shadow Shaman, readying its attack. Charlie leapt to the side, ducking into a somersault, just in time to avoid its magic missile. As he came back up, he zigzagged toward it, and plunged his sword through its mask before it could ready another round. Panting a little, he looked around. Surely Abigail wouldn't have fallen prey to *that?*

He set out to search all the chambers, taking as much time as he dared, peering into every last nook and cranny. There was no sign of Abigail, but also no sign of any larger monsters, which he took as a good omen. As he entered the last chamber, he saw that the ladder down to the next floor had already been unearthed: she'd made it that far, at least.

As he descended the ladder, he kept his eyes peeled, his heart beating uncomfortably fast in his chest. He was fairly certain he hadn't done enough damage to that Shadow Brute to kill it, and it could be anywhere. Cursing himself for not dispatching the beast last time, he dropped to the floor as silently as he could. The lava had dried up here, and it was too dim to make out much beyond the circle of his own torchlight; he crept along, squinting into the darkness, hoping against hope that Abigail had hidden herself somewhere.

Charlie rounded a bend, torch held high, and saw it: the ladder to the next floor. Maybe Abigail had made it through. Frankly, he was impressed she hadn't turned around, but then he knew she was stubborn. There was a light smattering of blood on the ground that he crouched to examine, but there was no way to tell whether it belonged to a human or a monster, and at

any rate it wasn't enough to be worrisome. As he straightened from his crouch, he heard a familiar rasping groan from behind him, and he turned with his hand already on his sword hilt.

There it was, creeping out from the shadow of an abandoned archway: a Shadow Brute, and judging by the mangled, poorly-healed flesh of its face, it was the same one that had nearly killed Charlie. *(Had* killed Charlie? He still wasn't sure of the terminology. His heart had stopped, after all.) Fear flooded his veins, but the image of Harvey's tear-streaked face beside his hospital bed flashed before his eyes, and he was filled with resolve.

"Not this time," he snarled, and drew his sword just as the beast lunged—

CRACK.

There was a sickening thud, the sound of metal against bone, and the Shadow Brute crumpled to the ground in a graceless heap. Charlie stared at it stupidly, then looked back to where it had been, and his jaw dropped in surprise. Towering over the fallen beast, looking like an avenging angel with a bloody club in his hands and a face twisted with fury, was Harvey. The doctor stood panting for a moment, glaring down at the Brute in undisguised rage, before meeting Charlie's stunned gaze.

"Hi, honey," Harvey said, his mustache twitching upward. "How was your day?"

Charlie kept staring, so many questions crossing his mind he hardly knew where to start, and what finally came out was, "I had him that time."

A hard, angry smile crossed Harvey's face. "Oh, no doubt, but I'm afraid that one was all mine. I owed him one." The injured beast stirred with a moan, and Harvey pushed his glasses up on his nose. "Excuse me for a moment."

With that, he brought the club down viciously on the Shadow Brute, again and again, raising it up above his head with every swing. Charlie found himself completely struck dumb, watching his kind, gentle husband beat a monster to death with every ounce of his strength. *Should I help? ...No, it doesn't look like he needs it.*

At last, when the beast was silent and still—and essentially flattened—Harvey straightened and turned back to Charlie, fixing his skewed glasses. Charlie allowed himself a moment to take it all in. Harvey's shirt sleeves were rolled up almost to the elbow, the muscles in his forearms standing out from all the exertion. A messenger bag was slung across his body, presumably carrying medical supplies. Blood spattered him in a wide arc from his hip to his jaw, a few stray flecks dotting his glasses. His hair had gone wild, his tie was pulled loose, and Charlie had never seen him in such a disheveled state. He looked...*dangerous.*

"Are you all right?" he asked Charlie, head tilting in concern.

"Is it bad that I've never been more turned on in my life?"

"Probably," Harvey said, smirking, "but I'm not inclined to worry about it." He stepped forward, wrapping an arm around the small of Charlie's back, and ducked in for a kiss. As

their hips came into alignment, he couldn't resist arching his body against Harvey's a little, and was met with a hum of approval. He desperately wished there was time to act on it (and what was going on in his lizard brain, that seeing a violent display of testosterone made him want to drop to his knees on the floor of a cave?), but at last he remembered the reason they were here.

"Harvey," he gasped, breaking away from the kiss with reluctance, "I'm so sorry, I didn't want to break my promise, but —*"* Harvey stopped him with a hand on his lips, and Charlie's explanation died in his throat.

"I know, honey, I know. It's fine. I understand."

"You're not angry?"

Harvey's brow furrowed. "Of *course* I'm not angry. You were trying to save someone's life! I understand that there are emergencies, Char." He released Charlie and stepped back, hoisting the club over his shoulder. "But I meant it when I said I was coming with you, so: here I am."

Looking at Harvey, so out of his element but so determined to protect him, Charlie was filled with admiration for his courage—and a wave of love so fierce it brought a lump to his throat. How had he earned this kind of devotion? It was more than he could possibly deserve. He gave a stiff nod, blinked hard, and slid his sword back into its sheath. "Let's go get her, then."

It turned out that having a partner to go Indiana Jonesing with was kind of awesome, even if Charlie was getting increasingly worried about Abigail. They moved slowly through the next floor together, back to back, watching for baddies in both directions. It seemed much larger and twistier than the others; Charlie couldn't see far ahead, there was always another bend in the path. The one thing that gave him hope was the clear evidence that someone had recently been here. Two dead Shadow Shamans lay at one juncture, and beside an opened barrel, a skeleton rested in pieces. Splatters of slime acid painted the walls in lurid colors. Harvey grimaced as he edged around a particularly vivid purple slime puddle, trying not to get it on his shoes.

"No offense, honey, but you have some strange hobbies."

"Tell me about it," Charlie replied grimly, peering around a bend in the path. "Believe me, the moment we find Abby, we can get out of here." He didn't mention that his addiction, or whatever it was, had grown stronger than ever. He was almost shaking with the desire to keep moving downward; he had to remind himself several times that they weren't looking for a *ladder,* they were looking for a *woman.* But Harvey's presence at his back was grounding, both a comfort and a reminder of why he had to fight against the urge to keep descending.

Suddenly, a blood-curdling female scream echoed through the tunnel. "Abigail!" Charlie and Harvey both shouted, and broke into a run, all strategy forgotten. Their feet pounded down the stone floor, Charlie's pack clanking noisily at his back. He couldn't stop thinking about the Shadow Brute, about how quickly it had surprised him and overpowered him, how even armed with his sword he hadn't stood a chance—

They heard the sound of something clattering to the ground, and veered sharply down the tunnel to the right. Charlie could see a glimmer of torchlight on the walls leading around the bend, and Harvey saw it at the same time.

“Charlie—”

“I know!”

As they rounded the corner, Charlie raised his sword, in case they needed to get the jump on a monster. But there was a flash of purple in the corner of his eye, and he leapt backward, barreling into Harvey and knocking them both to the ground. A half a second later, the blade of Abigail’s sword went whooshing through the air where his neck had just been, clashing against the wall of the cave with a metallic clang.

“Oh, shit,” Abigail gasped, as Charlie lay, panting, on top of Harvey’s bony and equally winded form. “I’m sorry! I’m sorry! I thought you were a monster! Sorry, Charlie...and...Dr. Harvey?”

Charlie got stiffly to his feet, reaching a hand down to help Harvey up; Harvey winced, rubbing at his tailbone with a baleful expression. “Hello, Abigail,” he said, straightening his medical bag. “Are you all right? Not injured, are you?”

“We heard you scream,” Charlie added.

Abigail didn’t *look* injured. There were a few scratches on her face and arms, a bruise blossoming across her left cheekbone, but other than that she seemed perfectly fine. She huffed impatiently, gesturing behind herself. A number of small, red, winged corpses littered the floor behind her. “I’m fine. I just…” She ducked her head, looking embarrassed. “I didn’t know there would be *bats* in here. I really, really hate bats.”

Charlie stared at her. He didn’t know which he was more incredulous about: the fact that she’d made it this far completely unharmed, or the fact that after apparently killing dozens of larger and more threatening monsters, she’d been terrified of some *bats*. “There are a lot of bats, Abby,” he said, as gently as he could. “It’s, you know, a mine. That’s kind of their thing.”

“I know that *now,”* she said testily, tossing her hair over her shoulder. She had it held back in a braid, and wore a tank top with shorts; he wondered if he was the only one who’d played too much *Tomb Raider*. “But you never talked about them. Neither did the guys in the Guild.”

“Well,” Charlie said, trying to think of a way to say *that’s because bats are kind of nothing, compared to the rest of the spooky shit in here* that didn’t sound insulting. He decided there wasn’t one. “I’m glad you’re okay. Your parents were really worried about you.”

“Oh, for Yoba’s sake,” she growled. “I’m twenty-three years old. I’m not a *child.”*

“I know,” Charlie assured her, offering a smile. “I did tell them you could handle yourself, for what it’s worth.” He decided not to share that he had been worried, too. Obviously, his fears had been unfounded. Abigail looked slightly mollified at this, returning the smile.

“Would you like me to take a look at those scratches?” Harvey asked, indicating his bag, but she shook her head.

“I’m fine. They’re nothing a good wash and a Band-Aid can’t handle.”

“In that case...We can’t tell you what to do, Abigail, but I think your mom and dad would appreciate a status update,” Harvey said. “Would you—”

“Yeah, I’m out of here,” she sighed. “I’ve had enough bats for one day.”

They escorted her back to the ladder up, winding through the tunnels. Now that Charlie wasn’t running full-tilt, he could see the potential on this floor: a few sparkly-looking rocks, a vein of what he thought was gold in one of the walls, and tucked in a corner...the ladder to the next floor. As they passed it, his steps faltered. He had to go down there, he *had* to. He had never wanted anything more in his entire life. His head spun, his stomach cramped, he felt a tingling numbness in his extremities. He knew it would all be fine, all his symptoms would disappear, if he could just *go down there,* right now. Creeping closer to it, he stole a glance over his shoulder. Abigail and Harvey were chatting, almost to the ladder leading back up; they wouldn’t notice if he just slipped away, he could do it, he could—

He could ruin his marriage and possibly get himself killed. What was he *doing?*

“Harvey,” he managed to force out through his clenched teeth. Harvey turned, brows furrowed at his tone; when he saw Charlie, his entire expression changed to one of alarm.

“Charlie!” he barked, rushing over. “Charlie, what’s wrong?” He pressed a hand to Charlie’s clammy forehead, checking his temperature. “Yoba, you’re cold. What’s happening?”

“I can’t—” Charlie tried again, knowing he was scaring Harvey, and probably Abigail too. “I have to—it’s—” He gestured weakly at the ladder, hoping Harvey would understand, because he couldn’t get the words out. “Help me,” he pleaded, barely above a whisper. Harvey looked pale and frightened for a moment, and Charlie hated himself for putting that look on his face again. But then, his expression hardened (and Charlie knew that blazing look, it was the hot-air balloon look, the hospital-room look), and he turned back to Abigail.

“What’s wrong with him?” she asked.

“He has...a condition,” Harvey said. “He needs treatment, but don’t worry, I know what to do. Can you make it back out by yourself? I’ll get him fixed up.”

“Yeah, I can,” she replied dubiously. “Are you sure? Is he going to be okay?”

“He’ll be good as new, I promise. We’ll be up soon.”

Abigail didn’t look entirely convinced, but she took Harvey at his word; with a final glance at Charlie, she hoisted herself up the ladder and was gone. When the clanking of her pack had faded into the distance above, Harvey turned back to Charlie, still wearing that look.

“Harvey, I’m so sorry, I can’t leave,” Charlie rasped. “I want to, but—”

“We’re not leaving,” Harvey said decisively, hitching his bag higher on his shoulder. “I want you to try something for me. All right?”

“Okay.”

“Take a step toward the ladder.”

Charlie did as he’d asked, and the relief that flooded his veins was so sweet he nearly fainted, like a fix after months of withdrawals. But the moment he turned back to Harvey, it dissolved like bubbles in his bloodstream, and the crushing sense of urgency came back.

“I—”

“I know, honey. I know.” Harvey moved to the top of the ladder, peering down into the darkness below. “We’re going to fix it.”

“How?”

He straightened, meeting Charlie’s eyes. “This has gone on long enough,” he said. “Whatever it is, we’re going to get to the bottom of it. Literally, if we have to.”

Charlie couldn’t believe what he was hearing. “Do you mean…V.” He swallowed hard. “You don’t have to do this. It could be dangerous, I don’t know what’s down there.” There was no force on earth strong enough to keep Charlie from climbing down that ladder, but that didn’t mean he had to drag Harvey down with him. Harvey just held out a hand, waiting for Charlie to take it.

“Come on, let’s go. Together.”

Charlie took his hand, feeling a little of the pain ebb away. For the second time in an hour, Harvey had left him speechless with surprise and gratitude. And, honestly, he was hurting and afraid, and shamefully wanted his husband/doctor with him. “Together,” he agreed.

Floor 118 wasn’t fucking around. As if the monsters knew this was Charlie’s last hurrah in the mines, they had all come out to play at once. The moment they dropped down from the ladder, they were set upon by a cloud of red bats; they’d barely managed to get rid of those when a horde of slimes bounced around the corner and attacked them. More of those stupid rock crabs scuttled around in the shadows, and Charlie had to demonstrate to Harvey the best way to kill them (flip them over and get at their belly, don’t waste your strength trying to break the shell). When Charlie rushed a Shadow Shaman and sliced its head clean off, he turned to see Harvey staring at him with a stunned expression. Charlie wasn’t sure how to interpret it. Was he scaring him?

“You’ve...done that before,” Harvey said at last, faintly.

“Once or twice,” Charlie hedged. *Twenty or thirty times*.

Harvey nodded thoughtfully, and Charlie squinted at him, suspicion dawning. “V, are you...impressed?”

“No,” Harvey insisted, busying himself with a speck of lint on his shirt. Charlie’s mouth dropped open in an incredulous grin.

“Are you *into it?”*

“No,” he argued more forcefully. Charlie couldn’t see the tint of his face in the gloom of the mine, but his tone suggested it was flaming pink. “I’m not—I’m not a *caveman.”*

“Well, we are in a cave,” Charlie teased, and Harvey covered his face with the hand not clutching a club. This was so adorable that Charlie couldn’t resist crossing to him, pressing a kiss to the tiny bit of cheekbone not hidden behind his hand. “We’re going to discuss this later.” They had a job to do, even if Harvey *was* looking at him as though he were some kind of sexy barbarian protector. Harvey finally let his hand drop from his face, the corners of his mustache fighting not to creep upward, and twined his fingers with Charlie’s.

“We’re *never* going to discuss this again.”

Weirdly, whatever horrible urge plagued Charlie, it was actually *helpful* for progressing down in the mines: the moment he started heading the wrong direction, he felt the wracking nausea and chills again, and so they found their way quickly. It all went more or less fine, with the big stuff cleared out and only a handful of rock crabs to contend with, until Charlie spotted the ladder down to the next level. “There it is!” he shouted, relief washing over him, and in his excitement he forgot to check for hidden nooks in the surrounding chamber. He’d gotten his foot onto the top rung, already starting the scramble downward, when he heard the unsettling, heavy breathing.

“Ah, shit,” he groaned, turning around just in time to see the disembodied head float up from behind a pile of crates. Its cheeks puffed out, readying its attack, and Charlie braced himself for the impact. It wouldn’t seriously injure him, he’d been hit with one of these before, but Jesus would it be painful—

Something hit it right between the eyes, and the head’s expression changed to one of surprise for just an instant; then it exploded, spattering the rocks beneath it with pinkish goo. Charlie whipped around, and there was Harvey, holding a slingshot at arm’s length and looking smug.

“What—where did that come from?!”

“I found it in your toolbox while I was grabbing the club,” Harvey said, straightening his glasses primly. “I was surprised you didn’t bring it with you.”

“I like to do my monster-killing up close and personal,” Charlie explained, but Harvey raised an eyebrow at him.

“You’re sure? Not because you’re a terrible shot?”

“I am not!”

“Let’s go ask the slingshot game attendant at the Fair about that.”

They both laughed at this—Harvey was right, of course, Charlie really *was* a terrible shot—and then Harvey was climbing down the ladder after him. “What was that thing, anyway?” he asked as they descended. “It was horrifying.”

“Squid Kid. That’s what Krobus calls them, anyway.”

“That seems...not correct? In any way?”

“Yeah, I kind of don’t think he’s ever seen a squid.” Charlie considered this as his feet touched soil; he moved aside so Harvey could hop down the rest of the way. “Maybe not a kid either, actually.” Charlie glanced sideways at Harvey, who seemed surprisingly unruffled for having just shot a disembodied head in the face. “You okay? You’ve seen a lot of weird shit today.”

“Oh, I’m fairly sure I’m dissociating at this point,” Harvey laughed. “Ask me again when we get home. Maybe with a lot of wine.”

“You got it, Number One.”

Charlie looked around, suddenly realizing how quiet it was. The floor—what was it, 119?—seemed completely empty. It was a single large room, shadowed at the edges, and directly ahead of them was…

“There’s the ladder!” Harvey said, sounding relieved. “That’s lucky, isn’t it?”

The back of Charlie’s neck prickled, though he didn’t know why. *Lucky* was not the way he generally felt in the mines, unless he was striking gold. “It seems that way,” he said cautiously, and took a step forward onto the packed red earth.

They weren’t lucky.

The moment Charlie stepped forward, a chorus of noises began from the shadows around the perimeter of the room: the squishing of slimes, the heavy breathing of Squid Kids, the growling of Shadow Brutes, the screech of bats. He met Harvey’s eyes, sure his own face mirrored his husband’s expression of dread.

“Charlie,” Harvey said warily, his tone questioning.

“Get ready,” Charlie ordered, lifting his sword into position. Harvey pulled out his slingshot, stepping shoulder-to-shoulder with Charlie, and then the first monsters burst out of the shadows.

It was chaos, utter pandemonium. Charlie had never seen so many monsters in one place—had never even *imagined* he would. They came from every direction, and Charlie was fervently glad the ladder was against a wall so they could at least have *something* solid at their backs. As the creatures rushed them, Harvey started shooting. He was a good shot, but not a crack shot—he hit maybe half the targets he aimed for, but it certainly helped, Squid Kids and bats falling from the sky before they had a chance to reach them. The first slimes

bounded into Charlie's reach, and he slashed out with his sword. There was no time for strategy, no time for finesse. He just hacked grimly away, dodging and leaping.

A cry from behind him sent his stomach plummeting into his shoes, but he couldn't turn, locked in combat with a Shadow Brute. *"Harvey!"* he shouted, terrified. If something happened to Harvey down here he was never going to forgive himself, *never,* why couldn't he have been strong enough to climb the ladder—

"I'm okay!" Harvey called, his voice strained, and Charlie nearly melted in relief. "Just—*Yoba,* that's a big fucking bug!"

In spite of everything, Charlie found himself laughing, a little hysterically. "Yeah, they grow them big down here," he called back, finally stabbing his sword through the Shadow Brute's chest with both hands. "Sorry I didn't warn you!"

Harvey didn't respond, but Charlie heard his club making contact with various squishy and crunchy bodies, and so he assumed he was all right (and how fucked up was it that a swinging club had come to be a reassuring sound?). He took down half a dozen bats, a Squid Kid, and an absolutely enormous slime before he noticed: the horde was thinning. They were, improbably, making it through.

When Charlie had dispatched the last dawdling slime, he turned, panting. He was just in time to see Harvey knock a rock crab onto its back, then bring the club down on its exposed belly. Harvey straightened up, wiping his forearm across his brow, and exhaled deeply.

"Was that—holy shit, was that it?" Charlie asked, and Harvey turned toward him, a tired smile unfurling across his face.

"I don't know why I worried about you," he sighed, his tone dripping with sarcasm. "Clearly there's nothing dangerous down h— *ah!"*

Three things happened in quick succession: Charlie heard a rumbling sound from beneath their feet, a mound of dirt appeared just to Harvey's right, and without even pausing to think, Charlie seized him by the wrist and *yanked.* Harvey went stumbling off-balance, a toothy brown head popped up exactly where he'd been standing, and Charlie buried his sword between its eyes. They stood for a moment, breathing heavily, and then Charlie pulled his bloody sword free with a grimace.

"All right?" he asked Harvey, who was fixated on the hole in the ground with a thousand-yard stare. Charlie gave his wrist a little squeeze, silently repeating his question.

"Let's get the hell out of here," Harvey said, and he didn't have to ask Charlie twice. He towed his husband toward the ladder, picking their way over dead bats and burst slime puddles. When they reached it, he headed down first, already bracing himself for whatever fresh hell awaited them. If 119 had been infested that badly, he thought there was a decent chance 120 would kill them both.

“Well, this is unexpected,” Harvey said. Charlie stood beside him, looking around in mute agreement.

He’d thought of all the possibilities: more Shadow Brutes, maybe some other kind of horrible void creature he hadn’t even encountered yet, lava, giant spiders, the works. But this room was just that: a *room.* It wasn’t a cave. It had walls of brick, lit with gleaming red torches, and a smooth stone floor. There was an elevator door, rusted shut like all the others, and a large, ornate wooden chest in the middle of the floor. Other than that: nothing. No ladder downward. Nothing that could be hiding one, either, as far as Charlie could tell.

“Is it a trap?” Harvey asked, and Charlie shook his head.

“I don’t know. But first things first…” If he’d learned anything down here, it was the value of a quick exit. He crossed to the elevator, jabbing his pickaxe between the doors and throwing all his weight against it; they wrenched open with a horrible rusty groan. The little light above the door illuminated as though it had been waiting for him. Pressing the call button, he heard the ancient machinery grinding begrudgingly to life far above. When he turned, Harvey was approaching the chest, a hand outstretched.

“Wait,” he barked, and Harvey froze. “Sorry. I just...Shane has this video game where there are monsters that pretend to be treasure chests.”

Harvey blinked at him. “Is that likely?” he asked.

“Well, *no,”* Charlie said defensively, “but I mean...anything’s possible?”

They examined the chest from every possible angle, even getting down on the floor to peer at it from eye level, but ultimately they couldn’t find anything suspicious about it. It was just a box—a nice box, but a box nonetheless. Finally, Charlie came around to the front again, kneeling before it and looking up at Harvey.

“Maybe stand back with that club anyway,” he said darkly, and Harvey did.

He opened it. He half-expected it wouldn’t budge without a fight, but it slid smoothly open, as though it had been recently oiled. Inside, lying on a velvety cushion, was a key.

“It’s…” Charlie stuck his head in the chest to peer at it more closely, sure he was missing something. “It’s a key.”

“What kind of key?”

“A...bone key?” It looked fragile, honestly. The thing was about the length of his hand, seemingly made of worn white bone, with a skull at one end. Charlie was a foolhardy idiot, and he knew it, but even *he* knew that generally, things emblazoned with skulls were not good news. And he was grappling with his disappointment; this seemed to be the bottom of the mine, and instead of some kind of glorious treasure, he’d found...an old key.

But oh, fuck it. If it was the only thing he had to show for all this, at least it was something. He reached into the chest and picked it up.

The effect was instant. The moment Charlie's fist closed around the smooth bone, he felt a blissful, almost painful relief flood his veins; the pull, the urge he'd felt for nearly a year, evaporated in an instant. He gasped, reeling at the sudden weightlessness. Dimly, he heard Harvey speaking to him in tones of concern, felt hands on his shoulders, but he was focused inward. He felt dizzy, he felt unbalanced, but he'd never felt so *free.*

"Charlie, talk to me!" Harvey was begging, and he realized he was scaring him.

"I'm okay, I'm okay," he croaked, letting the chest fall closed and leaning his forehead on the lid. "I'm—I just—" He took a deep, steadying breath, then another. It was nearly enough to bring tears to his eyes. He turned to Harvey, meeting his husband's worried gaze with a helpless, beaming smile. "I think it's over," he said, clutching the key against his chest. "I don't feel it anymore, the—the—"

Realization dawned on Harvey's features, and his eyes went round. "Are you sure?" he asked, helping Charlie to his feet. "It's gone?"

Charlie took a step toward the elevator, then another, then another. Just for good measure, he turned and walked toward the ladder, even put his foot up on the bottom rung. He felt nothing: just that same relief, as though the entire episode had been nothing but a bad dream. Feeling suddenly giddy, he ran to Harvey, flinging his arms around his neck.

"It's gone!"

Harvey's arms went around him, pulling him close, his face buried against Charlie's neck. "Thank Yoba," he whispered fiercely. They clung to each other, breathing hard; Charlie felt like *himself* for the first time in ages. He didn't understand anything that had happened, didn't know why the key had called to him so strongly, and on some level he knew that should scare him. But he couldn't find it in himself to worry about anything just now. His pain was gone, he would walk out of the mine in a few minutes and never look back, and he could keep his promise to Harvey. From now on, he would do what he should have been doing all along: work on his farm, spend time with Harvey and Bones (and, if things went to plan, their children), and get his adventure fix only from video games. (Not *Tomb Raider.* Probably.)

A few minutes later, Harvey lifted his head, eyeing the elevator doors without releasing Charlie. "When can we get out of here?" he asked.

"Not for a while," Charlie sighed. "That elevator takes a *long* time to make it down this far. At least ten minutes, probably." He cracked a smile, still feeling full to the brim with happiness. "Did you bring a deck of cards, by any chance?"

"Hmm." Harvey peered at him over his glasses, calculating, and something about the look in his eyes sent a shiver down Charlie's spine. "I've got a better idea," his husband asserted, and kissed him.

Oh. *Oh.* In the panic of Abigail's screams and the horrible desperation to get to the bottom of the mine, Charlie had forgotten all about his earlier surge of adrenaline-induced lust. It all came back to him like a crashing wave, the visceral memory of wanting to drop to his knees, to let Harvey use him any way he wanted. And he remembered how Harvey had looked at

him later, as though he'd felt the same way. Well, this was as good a place as any for a makeout session; they could entertain themselves until the elevator arrived, then go home and take each other to pieces in the comfort of their own bed.

Harvey's hands clawed at his shoulders, pushing at the straps of Charlie's backpack almost frantically. Charlie twisted, letting it slide down his arms to the ground without breaking away from Harvey's mouth. The moment it hit the floor, Harvey was driving him insistently backward, further and further, until Charlie felt the solid brick of the wall against his back. And that wasn't the only solid thing pressed against him; Harvey's arousal was obvious against his stomach, and Charlie's mouth opened in a gasp against Harvey's lips. Before he knew what was happening, Harvey reached down, seized the backs of Charlie's thighs, and hitched them up around his hips. Charlie instinctively wrapped his legs around Harvey's waist, and then he was pinned, the wall at his back and his husband's solid body at his front.

"Oh, Jesus," he gasped, tipping his head back; Harvey ground against him, latching his mouth against Charlie's exposed throat. "Fuck, Harvey, are you—right *here?* —"

"Right here," Harvey growled, in a voice so unlike his usual tone, all the blood in Charlie's body shot straight to his dick. Who needed a bed, really? One of Harvey's hands left his hip, coming up to catch Charlie's jaw; he tilted Charlie's head down to meet his burning gaze. Charlie couldn't look away, totally enthralled by the hunger in those green eyes.

"Do you want it?" Harvey asked more gently, though his voice still sounded gravelly and wrecked. Charlie dug his heels in over Harvey's hipbones, urging him on.

"Yes!"

Harvey's mouth found his ear, breathing hotly over it as he spoke. "You want me to fuck you right here in this cave?"

Charlie had never wanted anything more. "God, *yes,* Harvey, do it—"

Before he could *really* dissolve into begging, Harvey wrapped both arms firmly under his ass, pulling him away from the wall and spinning him around. He deposited Charlie on top of the chest, then yanked at his T-shirt, barely waiting for Charlie to lift his arms before whipping it off. Harvey let go of him for a moment to pull his messenger bag over his head and drop it to the floor; Charlie took the opportunity to unbutton his own pants, tugging them down over his hips and kicking them aside. Harvey dropped to his knees and pulled at Charlie's underwear, and as Charlie let him take it off, a sense of unreality came over him. Were they really going to do this? He knew Harvey had a thing for unconventional sex locations—the exam room came to mind, plus the beach in the Fern Islands, along with half a dozen sessions on a picnic blanket outside the farmhouse—but this was something else entirely. And both of them were sheened in sweat, totally disheveled; surely it was wrong that he was turned on by that, wasn't it? The fight-or-flight response apparently came with a third option, also starting with an F. Brains were weird.

He almost said something—almost let Harvey know he wouldn't be offended if he'd rather wait until after they'd gone home and cleaned up—but then Harvey's hands were on the backs of his knees, pushing them up and over his shoulders. Charlie found himself lying on

top of the ornate wooden chest on his back, his legs splayed and all of him bared to Harvey's gaze, and his protests died in his throat. It was filthy, it was animalistic, but apparently Harvey was just as aroused by it all as Charlie was, and that made it okay. *More* than okay; Charlie felt as though he might actually burst into flames from sheer lust. Charlie shivered from a combination of vulnerability and anticipation, and then Harvey's mouth was on him.

Charlie was devoutly glad they were on the bottom floor of a mine, because with his arms bracing himself on the chest, he couldn't cover his mouth. And the sounds he was making: he knew he was moaning, babbling, shouting, but he couldn't stop. The feeling of Harvey's tongue working its way inside him, licking and thrusting, was unlike anything he'd ever felt before. Somehow, in their nearly two years together, Harvey had never done this to him, and Charlie wondered what in the world had taken them so long. And it was one act Charlie had never had performed on him by anyone else; he'd never trusted anyone enough to let them. But all his self-consciousness vanished in the face of Harvey's obvious enthusiasm, and it felt *incredible,* every nerve ending in his body lighting up like a neon sign.

Charlie was dimly aware of one of Harvey's hands leaving his leg, but he couldn't spare enough focus to wonder why. He heard the far-away sounds of Harvey's bag being rummaged through, and then a moment later, slick fingers were probing in beside Harvey's tongue. He kept licking at Charlie's rim as his fingers worked him open, and Charlie's back arched against the wood of the chest, a helpless whine escaping him. God, it felt *good,* it was *so much,* he was going to go totally to pieces soon—

"Are you ready for me?" Harvey asked, mouth still moving against Charlie's skin, and Charlie nodded so hard he almost fell off the chest.

"Yes, oh my god, *please!"*

Harvey's free hand wrapped around Charlie's wrist, tugging it where he wanted it. "Keep fucking yourself," he ordered, sliding his fingers free; Charlie let out a disconsolate noise, but he did as Harvey asked, slipping three fingers into himself. Harvey stood up and stepped back, working open the buttons of his shirt. He held Charlie's gaze as he stripped himself, eyes dark and intent, and Charlie was struck again at how different he'd become during sex. Once upon a time, Harvey had been shy, hesitant to ask for what he wanted; on the rare occasions he'd really let go, he had apologized to Charlie afterward. But now, he let himself take what he needed, ordering Charlie around when they were both feeling it. It meant the world to Charlie that Harvey trusted him this much, enough to believe that Charlie would accept this part of him. And Charlie *loved* it. He'd never thought of himself as particularly submissive, and he still didn't, but there was something about seeing his gentle, sweet husband take control that *did* things to him. He loved that they could give and take like this, could be whoever they needed to be in the moment and know that it wouldn't change anything between them.

Harvey hooked his thumbs under the waistband of his underwear, tugging them down and off, and Charlie's mouth watered at the sight of his impressive erection. He'd assumed Harvey intended to flip him over, and was surprised when he got back to his knees instead. A gentle hand pulled at Charlie's wrist, extracting his fingers from himself, and Charlie moaned with frustration and need.

“Baby, please—”

“Shh, I’ve got you,” Harvey promised, wrapping both hands around Charlie’s hips. All at once, he pulled Charlie down off the chest and into his lap—and buried himself inside Charlie’s slick, eager body. Charlie flung his head back with a gasp, his arms clinging around Harvey’s neck. His husband’s hands spread out over Charlie’s spine, and his breath was hot against Charlie’s clavicle. Harvey spread his knees a little further apart, finding the right angle, and then, *oh, god,* he was moving. Charlie hung on for dear life, hooking his heels together behind Harvey’s back and drowning in sensation as Harvey fucked him.

Harvey let out a bone-deep sound of pleasure, picking up the pace. “God, Charlie,” he groaned, his mouth against the top of Charlie’s good shoulder, “I want you, *so* much.”

Charlie huffed a laugh and gripped him tighter. “You have me,” he pointed out breathlessly. “You’re having me— *ah!*— right now.”

“No, I mean—” Harvey tipped his head back, fixing Charlie with that piercing green gaze again, his wavy hair sticking out every which way. “I just—all the time, it never stops—”

Charlie knew the feeling. While their frequency had slowed just a little from the frantic early days of their relationship, the intensity hadn’t dimmed at all; in fact, he thought they were better together than ever. It was actually a little concerning, he thought. If things kept up this way, by the time they reached their fifth anniversary one of them was going to actually burst into flames. He buried his fingers in Harvey’s hair, leaning forward and mouthing along the shell of his ear. “Me, too,” he breathed, and then he kept going, knowing what it did to Harvey when he talked like this. “You’re so fucking good, so hot, you’re incredible, V, I love you so much—”

Sure enough, Harvey’s breath left him in a rush, and his hands slid down to tighten around Charlie’s hips. He sped up his strokes, and it was good, *so* good, but not quite enough. From this angle, he couldn’t quite get deep enough to bring Charlie over the edge. “Please,” he begged incoherently, “more, I need—”

“Yes,” Harvey ground out, in that same wildly arousing growl from earlier. He lifted Charlie off his dick, helped him flip over onto his knees with his arms braced on the chest, pushed his legs further apart, and thrust inside again. From the first stroke, Charlie knew he was a goner. In this position, Harvey could hang onto his hips and pound away at him, hitting his prostate with every stroke. (As he very often did during sex, Charlie sent up a little prayer of thanks to God or Yoba or whoever for giving him a doctor for a lover—he'd been with a lot of guys who had no idea where it was, but Harvey had never had that problem.) Charlie craned his neck around to look at him, and nearly dissolved on the spot: Harvey looked like a sex god (or, with that mustache, maybe a vintage seventies porn star), all his muscles standing out from the exertion and gleaming with sweat, dark hair falling in his face as he watched his own cock disappearing into Charlie’s body. He glanced up through that spill of hair, meeting Charlie’s gaze, and that was it for Charlie. He took himself in hand, jerking himself off as the tension built; then, he came shouting Harvey’s name, body clenching around his husband as he clutched at the wood of the chest.

“Fuck, *fuck,”* Harvey moaned. “Char—I’m so close—”

Still trembling with aftershocks, Charlie released his softening erection and reached further back. He took Harvey's balls in hand, rolling them gently, and grinned against the chest as Harvey's rhythm stuttered. He thrust in once, twice, three more times, and then he buried himself deep into Charlie and stayed there as he came. Charlie closed his eyes, savoring the feeling of Harvey's cock pulsing deep inside him. He loved topping, but he loved this too, knowing that he could keep some small part of his husband inside him for the rest of the day.

When Harvey slumped over his back, breathing hard, Charlie gently released him. He rocked forward, letting Harvey slip out, before turning over and leaning his back against the chest. Harvey looked wrecked, still up on his knees with his hair in his face and his glasses askew; Charlie smiled and wordlessly opened his arms, and Harvey settled between his legs, head on Charlie's shoulder. They sat like this for several long minutes, neither one speaking, Charlie's fingers combing through Harvey's sweat-damp hair. Charlie marveled at how wonderful it felt to be one hundred percent focused on the here and now. He hadn't realized just how much the pull had been intruding on his thoughts until it was gone.

Harvey chuckled, more a rumble against Charlie's chest than actual words, and Charlie made a questioning noise. "The elevator," Harvey murmured, waving an arm in its general direction. Charlie glanced up to see that the door was open, the car ready and waiting. "It got here at least fifteen minutes ago."

"Well. I *did* ask you to help me pass the time."

"I hope I delivered."

"Oh, you *delivered,* all right. Right into—"

"Charlie." Harvey sat up, raising an eyebrow and sighing in a long-suffering way. "Let's put our pants back on," he said. "You can make all the horrible double entendres you want at home."

"That's a big promise, V."

"Yoba help me."

Things went back to normal, or normal-ish, after their triumphant return to the surface. To Charlie's intense relief, he never felt the urge to return to the mines again, and the only signs that the entire ordeal had ever happened were his scarred shoulder and the key in his pocket. Harvey came home from clinic duty one afternoon as Charlie was reorganizing his tool chest —and burying his sword deep at the bottom. He looked at Charlie in silent questioning, his head tilted to one side.

"I'm not going to need it anymore," Charlie said. "My mining days are behind me."

"You're not going to miss it?" Harvey asked quietly. Charlie stood, draping his arms around Harvey's neck, shaking his head.

“Not even a little bit,” he declared firmly. “I mean it, V, unless there’s a real emergency, I’m never going back underground. I promise.” Harvey’s answering smile was so brilliant, Charlie couldn’t help kissing it off him. It was a promise he fully intended to keep. His days were so full without adventures in the mines, anyway: caring for their (now year-old!) barn animals; harvesting the late-summer crops; writing long, rambling letters to Shane and Maru; loving Harvey, every way he knew how.

Then, about a week later, it happened. As with nearly all significant things, it came at an insignificant time: a late afternoon, a Wednesday, when they’d both showered off the field sweat and settled in to eat their dinner. Just as Charlie was lifting a forkful of green beans to his mouth, a knock sounded at the door. He glanced at Harvey, who looked back at him in equal confusion.

“Are we expecting anyone?”

“No, unless someone needs medical attention,” Harvey said. “Although I’m not sure why they wouldn’t just call.”

Charlie was already out of his chair, heading for the door with an excitedly-barking Bones at his heels. When he opened it, the visitor turned out to be someone he had never seen before: a tall, muscular man in a suit and sunglasses. Charlie glanced around to make sure he wasn’t being filmed for some kind of prank show, but all he saw was a sleek black car with another suited man behind the wheel.

“Can I help you?” he asked, aiming for *polite* rather than *suspicious.*

“A delivery for you,” the man said, and held out a deep purple envelope. Charlie accepted it automatically. There was no address on it, return or otherwise, and he frowned at it in puzzlement.

“From who?” he asked, but when he looked up, the man was already retreating down the steps. “Hey! Who sent this?”

The man continued down the path and into the car without responding, and Charlie let out a huff of irritation. What the fuck? Did people *actually* just deliver mysterious letters and vanish into the night? Was he being accepted into Hogwarts? It would be awfully weird, being the only thirty-year-old student surrounded by eleven-year-olds.

Not that he wouldn’t *go.*

Turning back into the house, Charlie stared down at the envelope and nudged the door shut behind him. “Honey? Who was it?” Harvey called from the table, and Charlie shook his head.

“I...have no idea? One of the Men in Black, maybe?” He sat back down, offering Harvey the envelope. The doctor took it, turning it over in his hands. His brow furrowed.

“He just handed it to you?”

“Yeah.”

“Weird.”

“Yeah.”

Harvey held it up to the light, as though maybe he could see through the paper, but it was made from a very thick stock. He placed it in the middle of the table, between their uneaten dinners. “I think...it’s probably a bad idea to open unmarked envelopes delivered by strangers?”

“Definitely.” Charlie looked at the envelope, then at Harvey, who looked up at the same time. “But I mean. We’re still going to open it, right?”

“Obviously.”

Charlie did the honors, lifting the flap open with his thumbnail. Inside was a cream-colored card, with a spiky cursive message written in ink that matched the envelope. Charlie scooted his chair closer to Harvey’s and held the card out so they could both read it.

Gentlemen,

While this would generally not be my preferred way to introduce myself, current circumstances prevent me from making the trip to Pelican Town personally. In lieu of a face-to-face meeting, allow me to present my salutations in writing. My name is Qi, and I am the proprietor of the Qi Casino in the Calico Desert. I also devote much of my time and resources to philanthropic causes. Perhaps you have heard of me—

“Have you?” Charlie asked, indicating the line. Harvey shook his head.

“Never.”

—or perhaps I am yet a stranger to you, but I am confident that we will soon become well-acquainted.

I understand that you’ve made a significant accomplishment recently. Allow me to congratulate you for your fortitude, tenacity, and cleverness. Reaching the bottom floor of the Pelican Town Mine is no small feat, one that has not been completed successfully for many years. In recognition of your achievement, I invite you to visit my casino as my honored guests this coming weekend. You’ll receive the best accommodations I have to offer, and dine with me in my private rooms. It is my hope that I can provide you some rest and relaxation after your ordeal, and that perhaps you will indulge me with a few tales of your adventure.

I know that you are businessmen yourself, and undoubtedly quite busy. Should my offer prove insufficient to tempt you away from your work for a weekend, I can provide one more point of motivation: you have a key, and I know where the keyhole is.

I dearly hope that you will accept my invitation. If this is agreeable to you both, please take the five P.M. bus to the Calico Desert on Friday. My representative will meet you and show you to your rooms, and we three will have dinner that evening.

Best wishes,

Qi

"What the *fuck,"* Charlie said, thoroughly rattled. Harvey plucked the note from his hand, bringing it closer to his face and squinting over his glasses as though he could make sense of it that way.

"How—what—how does this person know we made it to the bottom of the mine?"

"How does he know who we *are?"*

"I'm…this is..."

"Oh, god, we're gonna get murdered," Charlie groaned, letting his forehead fall onto the table with a *clunk.* "Some rich weirdo is stalking us, he probably wants us for some kind of *Most Dangerous Game* thing—"

"Yoba," Harvey said in a strangled voice, and Charlie tilted his head enough to look at him; his husband's face was a brilliant shade of red. "Do you think he was—*watching* us? With cameras or something?"

Charlie's eyes went wide at the memory of just what those cameras would have seen. "Jesus. Now I'm kind of hoping he *just* wants to murder us."

Harvey sighed, flipping over the notecard to look at the back. "Seriously, Charlie, what is this? What is happening?"

"He definitely wants the key, right?" Charlie's mind was racing a mile a minute, so full of questions he could hardly form a sentence. He couldn't think of a single reason a mysterious wealthy stranger would want to invite them to his casino—and specifically mention the key—unless he wanted to take it from them. Or murder them. Or murder them, and then take it off their corpses. Charlie didn't have the healthiest sense of fear in the face of curiosity, but even to *him,* this looked like a thoroughly bad idea. "That's the only thing I can think of."

"You're probably right." Both of them looked toward the bedroom; Charlie had stashed the key inside his nightstand, unsure what else to do with it. "I wish we knew what it was for. Maybe it's valuable."

"You have a key, and I know where the keyhole is," Charlie quoted. "Fucker."

"We're, um…" Harvey eyed him across his face. "We're not going to go, right?"

"Of course we're not," Charlie declared. "That would be insane." The only reason to go was to satisfy their curiosity, and Charlie had gotten them both into enough trouble by indulging that particular impulse. Anyway, curiosity was *definitely* outweighed by all the very real possibilities of what this guy wanted to do to them. He pushed the invitation to the far edge of the table, pulling his plate back toward himself and giving Harvey's knee a reassuring squeeze. "Let's forget about this weirdo and eat our dinner."

"Agreed."

Hours later, Charlie lay in bed, staring at the ceiling. He couldn't sleep, and he didn't know why. Or rather: he *did* know why, but he was willfully pretending otherwise. He was letting it go. He was letting it go, the invitation buried in the pile of kindling they used for bonfires, and he wasn't going to think about it again. He was going to *sleep* and *forget.*

"Char?" came Harvey's voice, tentative and barely above a whisper. "Are you awake?"

"Yeah."

Harvey rolled toward him, and Charlie did the same, ending up almost nose-to-nose in the middle of the bed. He reached up to stroke his fingers down Harvey's stubbly jaw, letting himself get momentarily distracted (not for the first time) by the mental image of what Harvey might look like with a beard. Harvey's own hand traced over Charlie's hip, settling in the dip of his side and stroking a thumb back and forth.

"Are you still thinking about it?" Harvey murmured. Charlie closed his eyes.

"No," he lied. Harvey gave him a light pinch, making Charlie jump and open his eyes again; his husband's mouth was twisted in a wry smile.

"Come on. *I'm* thinking about it, so I know *you're* thinking about it."

"Okay, maybe I'm thinking about it, but I'm not, you know. *Considering* it."

"It would be very foolish to go."

"Mm."

"A terrible decision."

"Definitely."

There was a long moment of silence, and then Harvey spoke again. "Are you curious about it at all?"

"No."

"No, of course not."

"Of course not."

They met each other's eyes again, and all at once, they broke out into a fit of contagious giggles. "Oh my god," Charlie gasped, burying his face in Harvey's collarbone. "You want to go!"

"I don't *want to go.* I think it's a very bad idea to go. But...I have to admit, it's intriguing."

Charlie nearly asked him when he'd gotten so adventurous, but then the realization hit him like a thunderbolt: Harvey always *had* been, hadn't he? There was a pile of evidence in support of this theory: his love of *Star Trek.* The pilot thing, the ongoing fixation with planes. Uprooting his life to move somewhere he'd never even set foot before. The hot air balloon. The mines. Hell, Charlie himself: *There's a bit of danger in you, and I like that.* To say nothing of the sex in semi-public locations. He shook his head, chuckling at himself.

"Something you'd like to share with the class?" Harvey asked dryly.

"I just realized," Charlie said, "that *you're* the bad influence in this relationship."

"Ah, the jig is up."

"How did I not *know?* I always thought it was me!"

"Mm, boarding-school manners and glasses go a long way in covering it up. No one suspects a thing."

Charlie sighed, raising his eyes to Harvey's with a wry smile. "Well, if we *do* get murdered, I want my tombstone to say it was your fault."

"Murdered?" Harvey blinked. "Are we going, then?"

"Of course we're going. I was counting on you to be my impulse control, but it turns out you're even worse than me."

"I'm surprised it took you this long to figure it out," Harvey laughed. "And here I thought you knew me."

"I do know you."

"Oh?"

"I know you'll stop talking if I do...this."

"Oh."

Chapter End Notes

Danger husbands! Hope you guys are ready for some More Adventure. There's a chance the chapter count might go up by one or two; I realized while I was reading ahead that pretty much all the remaining chapters are crazy-long, so I might split a couple of them up.

A note about Qi: with all respect and love to ConcernedApe, I found his dialogue a little inconsistent in the game. Sometimes he spoke like a stereotypical movie gangster played by Joe Pesci, sometimes he spoke in this flowery speech with lots of elaborate words. I

tried to write him with the same inconsistency, but it made it really difficult to get a handle on him, and I came away from it feeling like the reader wouldn't get to know him at all. So I picked a lane, and went with the "flowery, self-important, affected" version rather than the "Goodfellas" version. I hope this isn't jarring!

Tomorrow: something is weird in the cornfield. Charlie and Harvey give in to curiosity. Mr. Qi makes a request. Harvey makes a decision.

Chapter 32: Fall, Year 3

Chapter Summary

> Something is weird in the cornfield. Charlie and Harvey give in to curiosity. Mr. Qi makes a request. Harvey makes a decision.

Chapter Notes

> I'm probably going to stop warning about long chapters, because they're basically all long from here on out. Super brief NSFW content, a sprinkling of angst, and a LOT of talking.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Charlie had thought it would be difficult to keep his mind off their ill-advised impending trip to the desert, but the next day was so hellaciously busy, he didn't have a moment to waste on thinking about it. It was the first day of fall, still sunny and warm but with a hint of chill lurking around the edges, and that meant planting. *Lots* of planting. Unfortunately, Harvey was buried under his usual avalanche of cold and allergy patients, without even Maru to help ease the workload. And Charlie's usual pinch hitter, Shane, was of course still shacked up in the city with Maru. Why had they encouraged those two to get together, again?

(Charlie was joking, mostly. He'd spoken to Shane on the phone a few times, and the man sounded more like a very convincing Shane impersonator than Shane himself. Purpose and genuine happiness had done wonders for him. Except his vocabulary, which was as foul as ever—a fact that Charlie found oddly comforting.)

Charlie's least favorite part of planting fall crops was removing summer ones. Nurturing a tiny seed into a full-grown plant was fulfilling, but tearing down a plant that was—for the moment—still healthy and green made him feel obscurely guilty. As with every previous season, he started on the eastern edge of the fields, working his way west as the day wore on. Hot peppers, tomatoes, his beloved blueberries: they all went into a wheelbarrow, waiting to be carted back across the field and added to the compost heap. Charlie tore his way through a particularly stubborn patch of melons, then turned his attention to the westernmost rows, and —

Huh.

This part of the farm was planted mostly with corn, which didn't need to be torn out as fall approached. There was just one problem: all of Charlie's corn was very obviously dead.

“What the hell…?” He moved down the rows, looking for any signs of life amidst the dried-out stalks, and found none. Even the opportunistic little weeds that always cropped up around the base of the stalks had withered and died. Charlie had no idea what to make of this. He’d checked on these fields *two days ago,* for Pete’s sake. Everything had looked fine then. Maybe a problem with the sprinklers…? He peered at the ground, and saw that water had puddled up in a few low points. The sprinklers were running fine, then. It was as though all the plants in these rows had just given up the ghost.

Unexpectedly, Charlie felt a horrible stab of grief. What business did he have calling himself a farmer if he couldn’t even keep a handful of corn stalks alive? Why had he thought he could make a life out of this? His neighbors were probably all laughing behind his back, talking in hushed tones about the city boy pretending to run a farm out west. To say nothing of Harvey, who had to be disappointed in him, who maybe even *pitied* him, who undoubtedly wished he hadn’t tied himself down to such an incompetent loser. It struck Charlie that he should just do everyone a favor and get out of Pelican Town, just *get out, right now—*

Charlie turned and stumbled back down the row, toward the farmhouse, his eyes filling with tears. He ignored the wheelbarrow full of crop waste and the backpack leaning against it; all that mattered was that he grabbed a few necessities and got on the train as quickly as possible. God, where was he going to *go,* what was he going to—

As abruptly as the grief had appeared, it vanished.

Charlie blinked away the last receding tears and straightened, looking around himself. What the fuck had just *happened?* Where had those thoughts come from? He didn’t believe any of that; he was doing *well* at farming, making a very comfortable living, and he was friends with all his neighbors. And Harvey, of course Harvey wasn’t disappointed in him, Harvey loved him. Charlie would have bet his life on that. Why had he suddenly felt so devastated, so miserable, so desperate to get away?

He turned back toward the cornfield, squinting. Once upon a time, he would have assumed the stress was getting to him, or maybe he was developing some kind of mood disorder. But life in the Valley had taught Charlie a few things, and the entire saga of the mines came to mind. It certainly wasn’t the first time Charlie had felt something inexplicable and awful after entering a certain area. Carefully, filled with dread, he took a step back toward the dead corn, then another. Then another. When he’d gotten nearly within arm’s reach of the easternmost stalks, it hit him again, with such force he nearly doubled over: the misery, the hopelessness. *You are worthless. You are unlovable. Get out, get out, get out get out get—*

He ran, this time. Snatching up his backpack along the way, Charlie sprinted all the way to the other end of the field. By the time he got there, he was so winded he could barely stand upright, but the horrible feelings had gone away again.

Something was seriously wrong with that cornfield.

Charlie was torn. Half of him wanted to keep running all the way to the clinic and not stop until he’d told Harvey what was going on. Half of him knew he couldn’t possibly afford to get behind on planting crops, and he should tough it out and keep working. Half of him just wanted to go inside and get drunk, and *yes* that was more than two halves, but he was too

rattled for math. In the end, he decided on a hybrid of the last two options: he stepped inside, took a few quick swigs of whiskey to steady his nerves, then got to work planting. But he gave the western edge of the fields a wide, *wide* berth.

He planned to tell Harvey, he really did, but by the time his poor husband staggered home from clinic duty, it was nearly midnight and Harvey looked utterly exhausted. Charlie barely had time to funnel some soup into him before he collapsed into bed. Well, they could discuss it on the ride to the Calico Desert tomorrow, maybe. Or, Charlie thought, he could save it for afterward. If they really *were* going to the desert to relax, and not to be man-hunted, telling Harvey he'd had weird inexplicable feelings again was a less-than-ideal way to start.

"Well," Harvey said, squinting. "It's, um. It's very…"

"Pink," Charlie supplied.

They stood outside the Calico Desert Oasis, an odd hexagonal building sprouting up out of the middle of the desert. Its lurid color seemed to vibrate in the heat, shimmering against the sand. Charlie, safely ensconced behind his sunglasses, didn't even know how Harvey could look directly at it. The building didn't really *look* like the kind of place that would house an eccentric millionaire, but Charlie supposed the benefit of being eccentric and rich was that you got to choose your own flavor of weird.

"Go on in, fellas," Pam called as she put the bus back in gear. "Sandy won't bite."

It wasn't really Sandy (the shopkeeper of the Oasis, and apparently a close friend of Emily's) that Charlie was worried about, but Pam didn't need to know that. Charlie glanced at Harvey, who nodded and picked up their suitcase, and they pushed their way through the door into the blissful cool of the shop.

"Boys!" an unfamiliar voice trilled. "Oh, she said you were cute, but you're just *adorable!"*

Alarmed, Charlie pulled off his sunglasses to see a woman approaching from behind the counter. She was nearly as tall as Harvey, with a thick mane of wavy red hair, a ruffled blue dress that left little to the imagination, and a general air of slightly manic friendliness. She seized Charlie first, planting a kiss on both cheeks like a French starlet, before rounding on Harvey and giving him the same treatment. "Oh! That mustache. Bet that tickles," she said in a conspiratorial undertone to Charlie, winking. Out of the corner of his eye, Charlie saw Harvey turn red from his collar to the roots of his hair.

"Um," Charlie said, at a loss for words. Fortunately, Sandy had more than enough to go around.

"Come in, come in! Em told me to expect you. You'd think that Mr. Qi might have mentioned it, but he doesn't talk to me much. He hardly ever comes out of his office, actually! I'm Sandy, but I'm sure you know that already. This is my shop. It gets a little lonely out here, I'm not going to lie. But I'm so excited you two are here! I hope I can send you home with some seeds. I have varieties you can't get your hands on in the Valley! Of course, they won't

grow out here, which is just such a shame, honey, let me tell you. I'd give anything to grow flowers out front, but all we have are cactus. But at least they make fruit! It's delicious, make sure you pick some up before you head back to the Valley..."

Over the course of this speech, Sandy had somehow managed to pluck the suitcase from Harvey's hand, circle around behind them, and steer them down a corridor toward the back of the shop. Someone stood at the end, watching over a closed door, and with a jolt Charlie recognized the suited *Men In Black* type who had delivered the cryptic note to his house.

"Welcome, gentlemen," the man cut in smoothly over a story about Sandy's favorite cactus, stepping aside and opening the door. "I'll show you to your rooms. I hope you had a pleasant journey."

"Oh, are you allowed to talk now?" Charlie asked acidly, but the man just gave him a bland smile and gestured toward the open door.

"Thank you for the warm welcome, Sandy," Harvey said, reaching out to take the suitcase back. Sandy didn't relinquish it right away, keeping her fingers wrapped around the handle.

"Don't you be a stranger, okay, honey? Come back out and say hi once you've gotten settled. I need to hear all the latest gossip from the Valley!"

Harvey stammered out something unintelligible that sounded like a vague promise to do just that, and Sandy flounced back down the corridor and out of sight. Charlie and Harvey stared at each other for a long moment; Charlie felt as though an extremely friendly steamroller had just run him over.

"What just happened?" Harvey whispered. There were bright-pink lipstick prints on both of his cheeks.

"Mr. Charlie, Dr. Harvey," Agent K prompted, and they both turned to look at him. "If I may? You'll be more comfortable when you've deposited your luggage."

"Okay, okay," Charlie sighed, and took Harvey's free hand. They shuffled through the door together, and Charlie felt his jaw drop. It was the weirdest place he'd been since moving to the Valley, hands down. Deep purple walls stretched away in both directions, framing a room much larger than the shop up front. The carpet was plush and midnight blue, the lighting low and moody. A cacophony of noise came from the slot machines and poker tables scattered throughout the room, and several crystal chandeliers twinkled from the ceiling in a lighter shade of purple. Charlie began to worry that he'd developed some sort of migraine on the bus that was affecting the color receptors in his eyes.

"Is Qi here?" he asked, as the suited man escorted them through the room. Who even were all these people gambling, and where had they come from? Surely they didn't all live in the desert, but they definitely didn't live in Pelican Town. Had they come all the way from Zuzu City? If so, why had Charlie never heard of this place before?

"Mr. Qi is indisposed at the moment, but he'll join you for dinner in an hour." Heading straight to a doorway beside the cashier's cage, he led them down an equally opulent (and

equally purple) hallway. They came to a stop in front of a plum-lacquered door labeled with a brass number one.

“Your suite, gentlemen,” he announced, turning an old-fashioned brass key in the lock and swinging open the door. He didn’t enter, standing aside and gesturing for them to go through. Charlie did, and as Harvey filed in behind him, he heard his husband let out a little involuntary noise of delight.

“No kidding,” Charlie said. Whatever he’d expected, it wasn’t this: an airy, sun-drenched room, with one wall made entirely of glass and looking out over a desert bluff. Sheer white curtains brushed the floor, framing the view, and an inviting-looking white sofa stood in the center of the polished sandstone floor. To one side, French doors led to an equally opulent bedroom, with a plush bed mounded with pillows taking center stage. To the other, an enormous bathroom with a claw-foot tub big enough to swim in beckoned to them.

What the fuck. Maybe *this* was the prize for reaching the bottom of the mine. If so, Charlie was beginning to feel a little better about his life choices.

“These rooms are yours for the next two nights,” Agent K said from the doorway. “You’ll find a menu of the available services on the desk, and Mr. Qi asked me to inform you that anything you’d like will be provided compliments of the house. I’ve left my personal number on the desk as well; please don’t hesitate to call, should you need anything at all. Enjoy your stay, Mr. Charlie, Dr. Harvey.”

With that, he placed the room key on a spindly little table just inside the entrance, pulled the door shut behind him, and left. The two of them just stood there, Harvey still holding their battered old suitcase, staring out at the fluorescent desert sunset.

“Why,” Harvey began, and then tried again. “How.”

“I don’t know,” Charlie said slowly, turning in one place. “But holy shit.”

“I didn’t even know this was *here.* Why doesn’t anyone talk about it?”

“What did he mean by services, do you think?” Charlie asked, crossing to the desk; Harvey put the suitcase down at last, pressing gently on a couch cushion. “Like room service, or—holy shit!”

“What?!”

“This!” Charlie thrust the list under Harvey’s nose, watching with satisfaction as his husband’s eyes went round.

“I don’t—in-room massages? A dedicated chef? Yoga instruction?” Harvey looked around again, as though searching for the hidden cameras. “Charlie, where *are* we?”

“This is either going to be the best weekend ever,” Charlie said, “or he really *is* going to murder us.”

“Should we unpack, do you think?”

Charlie eyed the door, mulling it over. On the one hand, the room was spectacular, and he was looking forward to making the most of their time there. On the other, experience had taught him that when something seemed too good to be true, it very often was.

“Maybe let’s not unpack all the way. Just in case we need to, um…”

“Make a quick exit?”

“You got it.”

In the end, they hung their nice clothes up to let the wrinkles fall out, showered (with Charlie casting a look of deep longing at the clawfoot tub, but there would be time for that later), and got changed. They’d debated a little about how formal they should be, but Charlie was glad they’d ended up bringing suits along; he would have felt horribly underdressed otherwise. Harvey wore the navy windowpane suit Charlie had bought him for that birthday they’d spent in Zuzu City, and it was only Charlie’s nerves about their upcoming dinner that kept him from being totally distracted by it. They’d barely gotten themselves put together and perched awkwardly on the couch when a knock sounded at the door.

“Ready for dinner, gentlemen?” called Agent K, and they stood.

Qi’s rooms were up a flight of stairs, but otherwise not far from their own suite. Opulence aside, the building wasn’t huge—there was just the one main casino floor and a small handful of suites, and then Qi’s residence, apparently housed in the odd little cupola on the top of the building. As when he’d showed them to their own room, the man in the suit waved them in without entering the room himself.

“Mr. Qi will be with you in just a moment,” he said, and retreated back down the stairs.

Charlie took Harvey’s hand again, and Harvey gave it a reassuring squeeze. The room was as deep purple as the casino floor downstairs, furnished with heavy-looking antiques and strange curiosities. On a table nearby, a small bronze statue of a chicken rested beneath a cloche; a gleaming brass telescope pointed out at the sky beyond the arched windows; a set of wall shelves bristled with every kind of gem and crystal imaginable. Charlie still had no idea who Qi was, but he seemed to be really leaning into this ‘mysterious rich weirdo’ thing.

“Charlie, Dr. Harvey, hello,” came an unfamiliar voice from their right, and both Charlie and Harvey jumped. Harvey nearly knocked over the little chicken statue, apologizing profusely as he set it right again.

“Oh, please don’t worry, make yourselves comfortable.” A short, squat figure entered the room, and Charlie blinked, trying to clear up whatever was wrong with his eyes. The moody lighting was obviously playing tricks on him, because for some reason, their host’s skin looked... *blue?*

“To clear this up quickly, because people always want to ask, but they’re never rude enough and we waste hours dancing around it: the pigmentation of my skin is a result of a spell gone unfortunately wrong. I’ve come to embrace it over the intervening years, though. Better to be

unique and memorable than forgettably handsome, don't you think?" he asked, coming to a stop in front of them with a secretive little smile on his face.

Memorable was definitely the word for it. Qi was short even by Charlie's standards, with sky-blue skin and plum-colored hair. He wore a Nehru jacket and a wide-brimmed hat, both black and glittering with multicolored sequins; a pair of mirrored purple sunglasses perched on his nose. Charlie had the thought that he looked like a very dedicated cosplayer, but for what, he had no idea. As for the story about a "spell gone wrong:" that was *clearly* bullshit, but Charlie wasn't about to start arguing with him.

"Mr. Qi, is it? Thank you for your hospitality," Harvey said, always the polite one. Charlie nodded stupidly at his side. "We are a little confused, though, about why we're here."

"Of course you are," Qi said, smiling blandly. "I consider myself fortunate that your curiosity overcame your confusion." He clapped his hands once, decisively. "Well, among other things, you are here to eat dinner. I hope that will do for the moment."

Charlie was half-tempted to argue, to demand a real explanation or details or *something.* But through the window, he saw a handful of staff setting a table on the balcony. And...he *was* hungry. He looked at Harvey, who looked back at him and gave an almost imperceptible shrug.

"For the moment," Charlie echoed. He could get answers on a full stomach.

"...at which point the poor woman attempted to sell me the Gotoran rug I had sold her associate just hours prior!" Qi was cackling, wiping tears of mirth out from under his glasses. Charlie laughed politely, having lost the thread of Qi's story about the Traveling Merchant about ten minutes ago. To his right, another anonymous staff member appeared with the wine bottle, holding it over his glass in question.

"Oh, I don't see why not," Charlie said, and the man obligingly filled it before moving onto Harvey's. He was surprised how quickly Harvey was putting it away, but then, even normal social situations made his husband nervous—and this one was *far* from normal.

It was a lovely evening, turning cool on the balcony now that the sun had disappeared behind the bluffs. A light breeze stirred Charlie's hair and kept him hanging onto his napkin with one hand. They'd worked their way through two courses already, a tiny shot of chilled soup that Qi claimed was made of cactus and a sliver of beef with truffle butter. Charlie found himself beginning to relax a little; Qi was strange, and obviously the whole situation was mysterious, but it was hard to worry too intensely with an endlessly full glass and a succession of delicious dishes to look forward to.

"It may surprise the two of you to learn that I was something of an adventurer in my youth," Qi said, accepting a refill of his own glass. "I believe I spent more time inside caves than out when I was your age." Charlie and Harvey blinked at each other; they were obviously different ages, who exactly was Qi talking to? "And I once sailed to the Fern Islands in a boat

I built myself. Blew off course and nearly drowned, but I made it back with an excellent story!

“But of course, my adventures are of a more sedate variety these days,” he sighed. “Becoming successful in business has many advantages—” he gestured around himself, at the lovely balcony, the waiting staff, the table laden with beautiful dishes and silver serving pieces— “not least of them the money and attention I can put toward my philanthropic efforts, but it does necessitate mitigating certain kinds of risk.”

“Like running off into caves,” Charlie supplied, and Qi gave a thoughtful nod.

“My treasure-hunting days are behind me, I’m afraid. Which is why I was so keen to speak with the two of you. I’d hoped you could regale me with a few stories from your mine adventures.”

“Um,” Charlie said, glancing across his face at Harvey. They still rarely talked about the mines, even after making it to the bottom; Charlie was always afraid of upsetting Harvey, of reminding him or triggering his nightmares. But Harvey looked more or less at ease, his face a little flushed in the dim light. Exactly how many glasses of wine had he gone through?

Maybe there were a few stories that would be safe to tell, though. “Well, actually, the first time Harvey ever had to patch me up was because I didn’t believe there were monsters in the mines,” Charlie ventured, and Harvey chuckled a little. “See, I’m from Zuzu City, and slimes aren’t exactly a thing there…”

“So we got home, I put my sword away, and we’ve never gone back,” Charlie finished, forty-five minutes and three courses later. Harvey gave a hum of agreement around his sorbet spoon. It turned out that Qi was an excellent audience, listening with rapt attention and reacting at all the right moments. Charlie had gotten unexpectedly caught up in the retelling, and even Harvey had chimed in from time to time, helping fill in a rough sketch of the journey from top to bottom. Some things had been glossed over—Charlie mentioned fighting a Shadow Brute and being injured, but then moved on quickly, and of course he said nothing about the inexorable pull or the way they’d celebrated reaching the bottom—but he gave all the detail he safely could.

“A very good story,” Qi declared, inclining his glass in their direction. “Although I admit to being a little dissatisfied by the ending.”

Charlie blinked, caught off-guard. “What?”

“I don’t mean to be rude,” Qi assured him. “But the two of you are young, brave, and capable. Why hang up the sword already? Perhaps there are further adventures to be had.”

Harvey reached over and placed his hand silently over Charlie’s, and Charlie squeezed back in reassurance. “Well, like you said, there are other kinds of adventures,” Charlie said. “It was really dangerous, what we were doing. And we’re trying to start a family, so we kind of need to cool it with the monsters and lava and stuff.”

“Mm,” Qi said noncommittally. “Well, that is a shame, but of course I understand your reasoning.” He settled back in his chair, folding his hands together over his stomach with a sigh of satisfaction. Charlie realized he still hadn’t taken off his sunglasses, even though it was fully night now; how he could see anything, Charlie had no idea.

The evening seemed to be winding down. They’d eaten five courses and a coconut sorbet to cleanse their palates, finished off several bottles of wine, and Charlie was so full he could barely move. Every few seconds, Harvey’s hand jumped a little in his grip, a telltale sign that the doctor was tipsy and trying to hide his hiccups. It had turned out to be a nice evening, if a bit strange, but there was one thing that still had Charlie dying of curiosity.

“Listen,” he said, setting down his wine glass and leaning forward, “I’m sorry to be nosy, but in your letter, you mentioned a key. And you said—well—”

“I said that I knew where the keyhole is,” Qi finished smoothly. “Yes. I hadn’t forgotten.”

“Oh. Okay.”

“I have a proposition for the two of you,” Qi continued, “and it involves that key, but it’s rude to discuss serious business over dessert. If you’re comfortable in your suite, I’d ask you to please enjoy the rest of your evening and tomorrow morning, and return to my rooms at five o’clock tomorrow afternoon. I promise, I will explain everything then. Is that acceptable?”

It wasn’t, really, Charlie had never been good with keeping his curiosity at bay, but what choice did he have? “Yes, of course,” he said, a little deflated.

“Thank you for dinner,” Harvey added, still the polite one even when he was drunk. Or drunk-ish, anyway. “Everything was delicious.”

“Thank *you,* gentlemen. I’ve thoroughly enjoyed your company.”

The next morning, Charlie woke to bright desert sunlight streaming in the windows, falling across Harvey’s sleeping face; for once, Charlie had woken first. He considered letting his overworked husband sleep, but the temptation eventually became too strong to bear, and he crawled under the fluffy duvet to see about waking him up. Judging by the way he gasped as his eyes flew open, Charlie had taken him by surprise—but judging by the way his thighs tightened around Charlie’s head beneath the covers, the surprise was a welcome one.

After he’d reduced Harvey to a panting, trembling mess, Charlie crawled up his boneless body, intending to kiss him senseless. But they were interrupted by a knock at the door, which turned out to be the casino’s chef, bringing them breakfast in bed. She lifted a silver dome off a plate of French toast, and as soon as the scent hit his nose, Charlie decided his erection could wait until later. The two of them sprawled across the king-sized bed, trading morsels and making orgasmic noises at how delicious everything was; when they’d drained the last of their mimosas and licked away the last dollop of whipped cream, Charlie strongly considered going back to bed. After all, they had nowhere to be until five. But Harvey padded off into the bathroom and started water flowing into the tub, and then he was tugging Charlie in there, manhandling him into the shower while the bathtub filled up.

Charlie didn't have time to question the point of taking a pre-bath shower before Harvey had gone to his knees under the spray, apparently intent on returning the favor from earlier. And who was Charlie to deprive his loving husband? Afterward, when he sank languidly into the now-full tub and pulled Harvey into his arms, he understood the wisdom of this plan. They lingered in the bath until their fingers and toes had gone pruny, chatting mostly about nothing, speculating about what their host could want from them. Charlie felt *reasonably* sure he didn't plan to hunt them, but beyond that, he had no idea.

They finally broke down and ordered from the service menu after their bath, despite Harvey's concerns that it was rude to take too much advantage of a free stay. He stopped worrying about it, or at least *talking* about it, when their couples' massage began. Charlie let his body go limp and his mind go blank, relaxing and wishing they had more than two nights here. (He actually thought Harvey gave better massages, but it was nice that they got to relax *together* for once.) They napped after their massages ended, Charlie feeling drowsy and pliable and extremely content. The weirdness of two days ago, of his panic in the cornfield, felt very, very far away.

After their nap, they dressed and headed out to the casino floor, where they discovered that Qi had left them a small stash of complimentary chips. They tried roulette, losing their bets immediately, and craps, losing even more. Charlie was having too much fun drinking martinis and speaking in a terrible James Bond accent to care. But when they tried blackjack, Harvey turned out to have a surprising knack for it: he won back everything Charlie had lost within minutes, and half an hour later, he'd doubled their starting money. Charlie wasn't sure which was the more exciting sight: the growing pile of chips, or the uncharacteristically smug look on his husband's face. He had ordered his third drink, perching in Harvey's lap to cheer him on, when the dealer cleared her throat delicately.

"My apologies, sirs," she said, "but it's five minutes to five, and I believe you're expected elsewhere."

Shit. Charlie had forgotten all about their meeting in the excitement of gambling; no wonder casinos tended not to have visible clocks around. He stood, towing Harvey and their pile of chips along after him, and headed directly for Qi's rooms. In spite of the mysterious meeting, Charlie felt a little spring in his step. They'd had a fun and relaxing day, and soon, they would find out what the key was for. And then tomorrow, they'd return to the farm and their animals, who Charlie had just begun to miss. Yes, it was odd to be invited to a secret desert casino—and wined-and-dined by a blue man in mirrored shades—but that didn't mean it *had* to turn out badly. Probably Qi's proposition was something boring, wanting to carry Charlie's wine at the casino or something, and it would all be fine.

But then they opened the door to Qi's rooms, and his voice beckoned them into a room they hadn't entered the night before, clearly an office. Qi sat behind the large black desk, but beside him, standing with his back to them—was that—

"Ah, hello, gentlemen," Qi said, smiling. "I hope you've enjoyed your day. I believe you know my associate?"

Charlie did. It was the Wizard.

“So, Razmo, what are you doing in the desert?” Charlie asked, once they’d gotten settled into the two chairs across the desk from Qi. Rasmodius sighed.

“If you’ll recall,” he said irritably, “I did once ask you not to call me that.”

“Oh, sorry. I forgot.” He hadn’t. It had been at Spirit's Eve the year before, and Charlie remembered it well. He just didn't particularly like the guy, with his self-important attitude and standoffishness, his insistence that he was harnessing arcane energies or whatever instead of just hanging out in his tower.

“Rasmodius is here to discuss that proposition I mentioned,” Qi cut in smoothly. “We’ll get to that shortly, but first, I must ask. Did you bring the key?”

Charlie glanced at Harvey across his face; Harvey looked back, seeming equally uncertain. They *had* brought the key, of course, but was it smart to show their hand this early in the proceedings? He hesitated just a moment too long, and Qi chuckled.

“I promise, I’m not going to steal it,” he said. “In fact, I have very little interest in possessing it for myself. But I’d appreciate the chance to examine it.”

Ah, fuck it. Charlie never had been very good at playing hard to get. He reached into his pocket, bringing out the key, which he’d wrapped in a handkerchief; he passed it over the desk to Qi, who accepted it reverently with both hands. As he unwrapped it, Rasmodius leaned in, squinting.

“Is it genuine?” Qi asked, and Rasmodius waved a hand over it. He murmured a few gibberish words, and Charlie didn’t quite suppress a snort in time; both Qi and the Wizard looked up, blinking.

“Look, I’m sorry,” Charlie began, “but all this, this *wizard* stuff, you’re joking, right? It’s not like people can actually *do magic.”*

The two men looked at each other as though Charlie had said the world was flat, and then turned back to him. “I assure you, they can,” the Wizard said, speaking slowly, as if Charlie were a particularly slow child. “Not all, of course, and it takes a great deal of study, but magic is very much real.”

“The monsters in the mines—how do you explain them?” Qi added.

“Those are just animals!”

“How many *animals* do you know of that can fire magic missiles?” the Wizard demanded, and Charlie thought about it for a moment. He’d started calling the Shadow Shaman’s attack that because Krobus did, but he’d just assumed it was a *Solarian Chronicles* thing, just a reference.

“I mean, it’s not like it’s really *magic* magic. I just figured it was kind of like those spitting dinosaurs in *Jurassic Park.”*

“Just to be clear—you believe in *Jurassic Park,* but not magic?” Qi asked politely.

“It is, as you so *eloquently* put it, magic magic,” Rasmodius insisted. “The Ferngill Republic is one of the most magically active sites on Earth, and Stardew Valley most of all. There is a tremendous magical energy running through it; that energy draws the monsters and Junimo there. And, with enough study, one can harness that energy, bend it to one’s will.”

“Show me,” Charlie blurted. Rasmodius looked deeply indignant.

“Excuse me?”

“Char,” Harvey murmured.

He was being rude, but he didn’t care; this whole situation was bizarre, and he was losing patience with the charade. “Show us some magic. If you really are a wizard.”

Rasmodius puffed up, glaring. “I am not a circus animal, to perform on command for unbelievers and—”

“Rasmodius,” Qi said, in a weary tone, “just show him, would you? We need to move on.” The Wizard turned that same glare on Qi for just a moment before sighing, rubbing a hand over his face.

“Give me your hand,” he said to Charlie, holding out his own. Charlie felt a deep sense of foreboding; it didn’t seem like a good idea to hand over his body parts to men claiming they could do magic, especially when he’d pissed them off.

“Um…”

“Give me your hand,” Rasmodius repeated, and reluctantly, Charlie did. The Wizard held it in one of his own, the other hovering a few inches above Charlie’s upturned palm, and murmured a few words; he closed his eyes, flicked his fingers, and then Charlie’s entire hand went up in flames.

“Shit, *shit!”* Charlie cried, wrenching it out of his grip and flailing it frantically as Harvey let out a bark of alarm. “Put it out!”

“It is not hot!” Rasmodius shouted over the din. “Pay attention to what you *feel,* not what you *expect* to feel. It will not harm you.”

Oh. It actually... *wasn’t* hot, maybe? Charlie brought his hands together, watching as the bright-orange fire engulfed both of them. It wasn’t even warm, actually, he couldn’t feel it at all. Beside him, Harvey still looked back and forth from his hands to his face with eyes like saucers. “It’s okay, V,” Charlie said, holding out his hands with an attempt at a reassuring smile. “He’s right, it’s not hot. See?”

Harvey hesitated for a moment, then reached out and gingerly took Charlie’s hands. The fire spread to his as well, and Harvey let out a gasp.

“It’s not!”

The Wizard muttered another unintelligible word, and the fire went out. Charlie looked up from his and Harvey's joined hands, his face breaking into a grin. "Do another one!"

"Absolutely not."

"Charlie, I'm afraid we don't have unlimited time," Qi interjected. "Rasmodius did as you asked, and I trust that will serve as enough proof for now."

"I guess," Charlie sighed. He didn't know *what* to believe; it still seemed like a hard pill to swallow, the idea of actual magic, but he couldn't really explain the fire. Maybe that was a puzzle best saved for later. He settled back into his seat, releasing Harvey's hands, and Harvey did the same. "Anyway. You were saying?"

"The key is genuine, Qi," Rasmodius said, picking it up from the desk. "It will work."

Charlie couldn't tell if this was good or bad news to Qi. He ran a hand over his mouth thoughtfully, tapping the fingers of his other hand on the desk. "Well," he said at last. "I suppose our way is clear, then."

"I'm sorry to interrupt," Harvey said, not sounding especially sorry, "but the way isn't clear to *us*. Can you explain why we're here, please?"

"Yes, yes. I'll get to the point now," Qi said, leaning forward on his desk with his hands folded together. "I'm sorry to put it so bluntly, but we need to be direct. The Valley is dying."

Beside him, Harvey let out a sharp little exhale of surprise, but Charlie felt something click heavily into place, something he'd understood in his heart before his brain. "I know," he said, and Qi and the Wizard nodded gravely.

"You've seen it?" the Wizard asked. Harvey turned to look at him, eyebrows disappearing up into his hair, and Charlie glanced at him a little guiltily before speaking.

"The Secret Woods have been infested with monsters lately, and they're all thorny and overgrown. Lots of the trees in the Cindersap Forest are rotting from the inside out, and...the crops on the western edge of my farm are dying." He hadn't wanted to worry Harvey with it, but seeing his incredulous face now, he knew that had been a mistake.

"Yes. These are early signs, but they are symptoms of a much greater disease. Tell me, Charlie, how do you feel when you visit those places?"

Charlie closed his eyes, letting the memory wash over him of his last visit to the western fields: the choking, debilitating sadness, the certainty that he needed to get out *right now* and wash it off him like an oil spill. "Awful," he said at last, "like someone died. Like I'd never be happy again. " When he opened his eyes again, Qi and the Wizard were exchanging a meaningful look.

"There is a being," the Wizard began slowly, with a drama that should have been ridiculous. "A creature that entered our world from the Void many years ago. We've known about it for some time, but it seemed to be dormant until several months ago."

“What happened?” Harvey asked.

“We can’t know for sure, but we believe it came into possession of a powerful magical object.” The Wizard and Qi looked at each other again, and Charlie cleared his throat impatiently. “A Prismatic Shard. They are extremely rare; we don’t even know where they come from. But occasionally, one appears—typically underground—and in the wrong hands, can cause catastrophic damage.”

“It lets a magical being focus and intensify that power, just like light through a lens. We think the sudden surge in dark energy to the west means that the Beast has found a Shard,” Qi said. “And is most likely hiding with it, gaining power, in a nearby cave. Skull Cavern.”

Charlie had about four thousand questions, but Harvey beat him to the punch. “But what *is* its power? What does it *do?”*

“The Beast feeds on despair,” the Wizard replied. “The aura that unsettled Charlie in the western fields is its influence, reaching out, sowing misery. It then nurtures that misery and draws from it to fuel itself, like feedback between a microphone and a speaker. Every living thing can feel it; even the plants are wasting away. It won’t be long before that aura covers all of the Valley, condemning all that live there.”

They all sat in silence for a moment, absorbing this. Strangely, Charlie wasn’t as rattled as he’d been when he’d learned about Krobus and the Junimo. His capacity for weirdness had, apparently, expanded over the last year. But there was one point he wasn’t quite clear on yet. “Okay. So why are we here?” he asked, and Qi and the Wizard looked startled.

“What?” Qi demanded.

“Harvey and I.” He pointed between the two of them, losing patience. “Why did you ask us to come here? What can we do about it?” Harvey seemed to think this was a good question; he turned expectantly toward the pair on the other side of the desk.

“I would have thought it was obvious,” the Wizard said, sounding genuinely taken aback. “We need you to enter Skull Cavern and retrieve the Prismatic Shard from the Beast, before it can do further damage to the Valley.”

He and Harvey reacted to this at the same time.

“Retri— *what?”*

“You want us to go *steal* from it?”

“I’ve read the fucking *Hobbit,* okay? No way.”

“Why us?” This last question came from Harvey, and Charlie cut off his own protests, curious to know the answer.

“You made it to the bottom of the mines,” the Wizard said. “That means you’re strong and capable, and *that* means you are our best chance.”

They absorbed this for a moment. Charlie thought there was likely more to the story, but he couldn't quite put his finger on why. "I'm curious," Harvey began, in a quiet voice that Charlie instinctively knew meant *danger.* "How did you know we'd reached the bottom, exactly? You contacted us very shortly afterward."

Qi looked at the Wizard, who squared his shoulders as though he knew his response wouldn't be well-received. "The chest containing the key was enchanted with a long-range monitoring spell," he said. "It was set to alert us when it was opened, and by whom."

Well, at least their "celebration" hadn't been picked up by any hidden cameras. This was a relief to Charlie, but Harvey nodded thoughtfully, and the back of Charlie's neck prickled with unease. "And is there any chance that when you set up this spell, you set up some others? Like, maybe, one that would make a person who entered the mines feel compelled to reach the bottom?" he asked, his tone hardening as he spoke. Charlie's jaw dropped open; he'd always blamed his own dumb lust for mystery, it had never even occurred to him that he might be under a *literal spell*. (But of course, he hadn't believed in actual magic until about ten minutes ago.) He stared at the Wizard, who carefully avoided Harvey's gaze.

"Not *any* person," he hedged, "only someone who had come in frequently, and already reached a significant depth—"

Two things happened at once: Charlie's brain finally put two and two together, *holy shit I started feeling it around the eightieth floor,* and Harvey stood so fast his chair skidded backward. "We're done here," he declared, in a tone that could have frozen lava. "Come on, Charlie, we're leaving."

Qi and the Wizard both spoke at once. "You can't—"

"I don't think you understand—"

"I don't understand?!" Harvey shouted, jabbing a finger at his own chest; Charlie shrank back in his chair. He'd never seen Harvey this angry, not once, and it was terrifying. "You almost killed him! He *had* to go back, he told me, something was *calling to him,* and if I hadn't gotten to him when I did, he would have *died!"*

"We had to find someone who could do it. Our need was dire—"

"Don't tell me about your *need,"* Harvey snarled. "Charlie isn't yours, to drag into danger and order around however you see fit. If you *needed* him, you should have *asked* him. You have no right to make demands of him now. Find someone else." He turned and started for the door, every line of his body radiating fury. Charlie hadn't moved, but when Harvey threw a glance at him over his shoulder, he scrambled to his feet.

"Charlie, please," Qi said meekly. "There is much more to discuss."

"I..." Charlie didn't know what to feel, what to think, what to *do.* The only thing he knew was that he couldn't let Harvey leave without him, not in that state. "I'm sorry."

And with one last look at Qi and the Wizard, who stood frozen in place, he followed his irate husband out the door.

The bus ride was, to put it mildly, tense.

Harvey hadn't said a word to Charlie while they packed their things, left the casino and boarded the bus, and Charlie had been afraid to touch him or speak to him. When they'd taken their seats at the very back and gotten a few miles down the road, dodging Pam's small talk as best they could, Charlie realized Harvey was shaking.

"Baby," he whispered, "I'm sorry I didn't tell you."

Harvey closed his eyes, looking pained. "Why?" he asked, and Charlie understood.

"I didn't want to worry you," Charlie admitted. "It's...been a rough couple of months, and it seemed like you were doing better, feeling better. I didn't want to ruin it, especially since I didn't even know if it was anything to worry *about.* And the thing with the fields, that *just* happened, I was going to tell you, I swear."

"Do you really think I'm that fragile?" Harvey asked, not looking at him, and Charlie felt it like a punch in the gut.

"No, darlin'. You know I don't. I just...I wanted you to be happy."

Harvey still wouldn't look at him, and Charlie felt cold all over. "You mentioned monsters in the woods. Were you ever in danger?"

"No."

"Charlie."

Charlie sighed, rubbing the back of his neck. Outside the window, sand had begun to give way to the scrubby prairie that stretched between the Calico Desert and Pelican Town. Charlie thought longingly of their hotel suite, of the second night they weren't going to get in it. "Last time I went, I got swarmed by slimes," he said. "There were a lot of them, and it wasn't great, but it wasn't *really* dangerous. Abigail helped me out."

Harvey did look at him now, and Charlie regretted wishing for it; the look of hurt on his face was almost too much to bear. "Well, I'm glad you had someone to *protect* you," he said pointedly, his voice tight and angry. "I had thought that was *my* job, but what do I know."

"It's—that's—I didn't go in there looking for trouble," Charlie insisted, feeling flustered and defensive. "I was just trying to cut some wood, and they showed up! And I haven't gone back since."

"And you decided not to mention it to me, because…"

Charlie stared at him helplessly, and Harvey nodded as though that said it all. “Because you didn’t want to worry me,” he filled in, sighing and looking out the window again.

Over the two years he’d spent with Harvey, Charlie had never really thought of his lack of long-term relationship experience as a problem. Oh, sure, it had given him some moments of insecurity and second-guessing now and again, but never any really serious issues. Now, though, he found himself feeling totally adrift. How did you fix things when you’d definitely, unequivocally fucked up? Their earlier arguments had been easier to resolve because there had been clear resolutions: Harvey worried that Charlie had been cheating on him, and Charlie hadn’t been. Harvey wanted Charlie to stay out of the mines, and Charlie (mostly) had. But this was more difficult, because the only solution Charlie could see was to go back in time and not hide things from Harvey. He could promise not to do it again until he was blue in the face, but would it matter?

“What can I do?” Charlie blurted at last. “I’m so sorry, V, I mean it. I want to make it up to you. What can I do?”

Harvey fiddled with his wedding ring. “You can trust me,” he said, and glanced at Charlie. “You can believe I’m strong enough to help you. I’m not going to fall apart, Charlie, and you confiding in me doesn’t worry me. What worries me is wondering what you *aren’t* telling me.”

“I will,” Charlie said instantly. “I promise, I will. I’ll tell you everything.”

Harvey nodded again, but didn’t speak. Charlie was dying to touch him—just to hold his hand, stroke his hair back, anything to chase away the chill between them—but Harvey’s body language told him that would be unwelcome. He felt a stab of longing for ten hours ago: just this morning, they had taken each other apart, cuddled in the bath, dozed in each other’s arms. He tucked his hands under his knees to keep from reaching out just on instinct. “Are we...are you okay, V?” he whispered, hating the way his voice shook.

“This isn’t all about you,” Harvey said. “It’s...magic, the Void Beast, the Valley. My head is spinning. It’s too much to take in.”

“I know.”

“And you’ve had weeks to start to process this. I’m just hearing about it for the first time.”

Guilt, more of it, just when Charlie had thought he was maxed out. “I know.”

“I just...need to think for a while. Please.”

It was the politest possible way to say *shut up and leave me alone,* but Charlie was fluent in Harvey by now, and understood. “Of course,” he said, “take all the time you need.” He was dying to fix things between them, but if being silent for the rest of the bus ride was going to help, he could wallow in his worry and guilt for a while longer.

But when they arrived back in Pelican Town, Harvey hesitated at the road from the bus stop. “I think I’ll take a walk,” he said, holding out the suitcase. “Can you get this home okay?”

Charlie's heart sank. Even when he'd nearly gotten himself killed, Harvey hadn't run away. Maybe this was even worse than he'd thought. "You—um—yeah, of course," he managed. "I'll...see you at home?"

"Yes. In a bit." Charlie took the suitcase, and Harvey strode away in the other direction, off toward the town square. It occurred to Charlie that maybe Harvey *wouldn't* come home tonight. He still had his apartment, after all; maybe he would stay there, listening to his old backup turntable and wondering why he'd married such a deceitful asshole. Just as Charlie began the short trudge home, Pam piped up behind him.

"Did you do it, or did he?" Charlie turned to see her leaning against the side of the bus, smoking. He groaned inwardly; on the best days, Pam rubbed him a little bit the wrong way. And today was definitely not the best day.

"Do what?" he asked tiredly.

"Whatever had the pair of you lookin' like that. *Somebody* did somethin'."

Well, Charlie thought, it's not like she's *wrong.* "It was me," he said. "I messed up."

She eyed him critically. "You cheat on him?"

"What? No!"

"Ah, well, then. Just tell him you're sorry and give him whatever he wants. Even if you don't mean it. Trust me, kid, there are worse things than swallowing your pride."

Charlie wanted to know what exactly qualified Pam to dispense relationship advice, but he kept this to himself. "I'll think about it," he said, heading down the path. "Thanks."

Bones had apparently come to the natural conclusion that Charlie and Harvey were gone forever, and he leapt all over Charlie in excitement the moment he came in the door. Marnie had cared for the chickens and barn animals while they were away, so there was no need to feed or muck them, but Charlie still visited; he needed a distraction, at any rate. He did their laundry, put their suitcase away, made dinner, even dusted, but Harvey didn't reappear. With every hour that ticked by, Charlie's stomach sank further into his shoes. Should he go find him? No, that was stupid. Harvey wasn't *lost,* he would come home when he wanted to.

If he wanted to.

Eventually, Charlie couldn't delay the inevitable any further; he was going to have to get some sleep if he was going to be functional at 6 AM when Pizza started crowing. He left the lights on in the kitchen and on the porch, herded Bones into the bedroom, and went to bed. But even though the exhaustion of travel, emotions, and work had settled over him, he couldn't sleep. Without Harvey, the bed was too big, and cold, and *wrong.* Even with a fire going in the house, he couldn't get warm.

After what felt like an eternity of shifting around fitfully under the blankets, Charlie heard the front door open and shut. He heard the familiar sound of brown Oxfords being carefully toed

off and lined up near the door, and then size twelve feet padding their way toward the bedroom. When the door opened, Charlie caught just a glimpse of Harvey's silhouetted form before he closed it behind him. Charlie didn't speak, oddly afraid to scare him off. He heard Harvey soothing Bones in a low voice, then changing into his pajamas, and then the mattress dipped as he slid into bed. Charlie shivered, still cold, and after a moment Harvey's taller form curved around his back, gathering him close. His husband's face pressed against the back of his neck, and Charlie felt a relief so profound it brought a lump to his throat.

"Cold?" Harvey whispered. He himself was cold, having just come in from outside, but Charlie barely felt it.

"Not anymore," he said back, threading his fingers through Harvey's. Harvey let out a sigh that traveled down Charlie's spine.

"I'm sorry I lost my temper," he murmured.

"You don't have anything to apologize for. I'm the one who should be sorry. And I am."

"I know you are." Charlie felt a soft kiss against the top of his shoulder. "Get some sleep. We'll talk about it in the morning."

Charlie did feel sleepy, now that Harvey had come home. "Okay," he agreed, yawning. After a moment, he added tentatively, "I love you, V."

"I love you, too," Harvey responded, and Charlie fell asleep secure in the knowledge that at least *some* things hadn't changed.

"I really don't think this is a good idea," Charlie said, for the tenth time.

He and Harvey stood twenty paces back from the dead cornfield, squinting in the morning sunlight. It looked exactly the same as it had the other day, stalks withered and brown as far as the eye could see. Beside him, Harvey shook his head.

"You're probably right," he said, "but I need to know. To understand."

Charlie didn't *want* Harvey to understand this. It had left Charlie, who was reasonably well-adjusted and confident, nearly wrecked. How much more could it do to Harvey, with his anxiety and self-esteem issues and emotional baggage? Charlie hated the idea of any of those intrusive thoughts entering his husband's head, even just for a moment.

But he'd promised to stop protecting Harvey from the truth, so here they were.

"Just...go in really slowly, okay? And come back when you start to feel something?"

"I will." Harvey stepped forward deliberately, in long, careful strides. Charlie felt a helplessness that threatened to overwhelm him, watching Harvey square his bony shoulders as he approached. *Maybe it won't work on him,* he thought. *Maybe it's just me, maybe I'm crazy, or like, ultra-sensitive to magic, or—*

Charlie didn't get a chance to finish his thought, because the moment Harvey's boot touched down on the soil of the first row of corn, he stopped dead in his tracks. Even at a distance, Charlie could see his posture crumpling, his shoulders bowing and his hands reaching up to cover his face.

"Harvey, *come back!"* he shouted, waving his arms uselessly. "It's not real, you'll be okay, just turn around!"

Harvey stayed rooted to the spot, doubling over with his hands fisted in his hair, and Charlie threw self-preservation to the wind. He took off running, kicking up dirt in his wake. As he drew closer, he felt the choking sadness start to descend like thunderclouds gathering overhead, but he shoved it ruthlessly aside: Harvey needed him, he couldn't let himself get bogged down right now. When he reached his husband's crouching, shaking form, he grabbed him by the upper arm and pulled.

"Harvey, baby, come on, we have to get out of here," he urged, his own voice trembling. He felt it, oh, god, it was awful, they had to go, now, *now*—

Harvey let out a wordless sob from behind his hands, and Charlie had had enough. He bent down, seizing Harvey under both arms and hauling him bodily to his feet. Harvey stumbled, nearly taking Charlie down with him, but they managed to right themselves and get turned in the right direction. Charlie couldn't run, supporting Harvey's weight like this, but they lurched out of the cornfield and into the rows of newly planted pumpkins. As soon as they did, the clouds lifted off Charlie, leaving only panic about Harvey in its wake.

"Harvey, talk to me," he begged, pulling at the hands covering his face. Harvey let them drop, revealing tear-stained cheeks and reddened eyes. He wore a look of anguish Charlie had only seen once before, at his bedside in the hospital room. Charlie pulled him down into a fierce embrace, making nonsensical soothing sounds in his ear.

"It's okay, darlin', whatever it told you, it isn't true. You're okay."

Harvey's arms went around him, clinging tight, and he pressed his hot face into Charlie's neck. His glasses dug into Charlie's bad shoulder, but he wasn't about to complain. After what felt like an eternity, Harvey's breathing began to even out, and he pulled back, sniffling. Charlie offered him a handkerchief, which he accepted, mopping at his face.

"Yoba," he croaked, his voice clogged with tears. "You weren't kidding."

"No." Charlie hesitated. He didn't want to know what thoughts had plagued Harvey, he really didn't. On the other hand, he wanted to reassure him, help him chase away any lingering doubts. Should he ask? "Are you...was it…"

Harvey gave a watery, humorless laugh, taking his glasses off to clean them. "You know," he said, "it was awful. Horrible. The worst I've ever felt, but...it really didn't tell me anything I haven't already told myself at some point. It's not very creative, is it?"

This was actually worse than what Charlie had feared, somehow. He slid a hand up the back of Harvey's neck, pulling their foreheads together. "No matter who put those thoughts in your

head," he murmured, "they aren't true."

"I know." Harvey drew back, looking over Charlie's head at the cornfield. "So that's...if they're right, Qi and the Wizard, I mean. That's what's going to happen to the entire Valley?"

"So they say."

"Mm." Harvey's arms tightened around him, just a little, and they stood in silence for a long moment. Charlie tried to calm himself, focusing on the warmth of Harvey's body against his, the scent of dried leaves on the breeze, the sunlight shining down on them. At last, Harvey sighed. "We can't let that happen, Char."

"I know." Charlie had done a lot of thinking the previous night, moping around the farm by himself. "I have some ideas of who we can recommend to Qi. Abigail, I know the bats are a problem but maybe there aren't any in Skull Cavern. Marlon's old, but he's tough, and actually I was thinking maybe Clint could—"

"What are you talking about?" Harvey asked, drawing back enough to look him in the eye. His expression was genuinely puzzled, and Charlie mirrored it.

"To...to go into the Cavern? I mean, *we're* not going to do it." Harvey just blinked at him, and Charlie felt the panic begin to creep up again. "You said—you told them they had to find someone else, and I promised you, I said I wasn't going back underground—"

"Unless there was a real emergency, and I think this qualifies, don't you?" Harvey asked incredulously, gesturing behind him at the field. Charlie's jaw dropped.

"You *want* us to go in there?"

"Of course I don't. That's the *last* thing I want."

"Then…"

"Charlie," Harvey said, "you know we're the best shot at this. We're the only ones who've made it to the bottom of the mine. Marlon's arthritis barely lets him walk to the Square, and Abigail can't handle a *bat.* Clint? I don't believe that man has fought anything in his life."

"But!" Charlie was beginning to feel like a crazy person. Was he remembering the conversation in Qi's office completely wrong? He flailed his hands around, grasping for an explanation. "You told them—Qi and Razmo, you told them—"

"I was angry," Harvey sighed. "I'm *still* angry. I'm probably not ever going to stop being angry about that. But if they're right…" He took Charlie's hands in his own, drawing them to his chest. "The people here, I'm their doctor, honey," he said, more gently. "It's my job to keep them healthy and safe."

"I think this is kind of an extreme interpretation of the Hippocratic Oath," Charlie said weakly.

"And this is our home. How can we just stand on the sidelines?"

Charlie stared at him, once again at a loss for words. How had he ever thought that *he* was the more adventurous one between the two of them? Charlie had felt uneasy about passing the duty off to someone else, but a part of him had been shamefully eager to do so: the memory of the mines, and the aura of dread surrounding the western edge of Pelican Town, had him terrified to take this on. Not to mention the idea of stealing a precious object from a fucking *dragon,* or whatever it was. But here was Harvey—sweet, shy, gentle Harvey—ready to charge down there and throw himself in harm's way to keep anyone else from suffering. Charlie felt suddenly, deeply ashamed of himself.

He couldn't get past the mental image, though: Harvey, clutching a club in his hands as some unknown horror bore down on him. It made Charlie feel nauseous, the idea of putting him in such a vulnerable position. *Again,* his brain helpfully supplied, reminding him that none of this would be on their shoulders if he'd just stopped going into the mines in the first place.

He let the words slip out without meaning to. "It doesn't have to be you." Harvey just looked at him, uncomprehending, and Charlie pressed on. "You could stay here. I could take Abigail, or someone else—"

"Charlie."

"No, listen. I know how it sounds. Okay? And I'm not—it isn't about you, you're so brave, I *know* you can do it. But I." Charlie broke off, swallowing hard. "I keep thinking about it," he whispered. "The Beast, whatever it is. If it can do all that to the Valley, what can it do to *us?* It's going to be so, so dangerous."

"Which is exactly why you need me there."

Charlie shook his head, his feeling of helplessness growing. "You could stay here," he insisted. "You'd be safe. And if something—"

"Don't."

"You said we'd talk about this someday," he reminded him gently.

"I meant in a few *years,* not a few months."

Charlie ignored this, needing to get it out. "If something happened to me, you could still...You'd have the farm, you'd have a home. You could take care of Bones and the animals, and you could still have a family." Harvey's grip faltered on Charlie's hands, his eyes going wide and shocked, and Charlie held on tighter. "The people here, they need their doctor. They need you—"

"And I need *you,"* Harvey argued vehemently. Charlie's heart thudded so hard in his chest, it hurt. "What are you talking about, I could have a family? *You* are my family, Charlie. There's no—there *is* no home for me, if you're not there."

"I don't know if I can protect you," Charlie whispered miserably.

"We'll protect each other."

Charlie had known from the beginning that it wasn't going to work, really, but he'd had to try, just once. "All right," he sighed, scrubbing a hand over his face tiredly. "All right." As he pulled himself together, he felt a hand gently cupping the back of his head, and then Harvey had stepped close; Charlie let his forehead come to rest against his husband's collarbone, soaking in his warmth.

"My place is with you," Harvey murmured, and Charlie felt it rumble through his shirt. "No matter where, no matter what."

Charlie knew that. He was certain of it, just as he was certain he would never really understand why he deserved it. And he couldn't deny that part of him—the part that wasn't totally occupied with panic about putting Harvey in danger—really did want him at his side, felt safer and stronger with him. He wrapped his arms around Harvey's waist, wishing he could go back in time and stick to farming, forget about the mines.

"I think," he sighed at last, "we need to call Qi."

Chapter End Notes

Mysteries solved! I hope this fits some puzzle pieces into place for you. (Sorry, Rasmodius: with Shane gone off to the city, Charlie needs someone else to antagonize.)

Tomorrow: preparations are made. A perfect day is planned. A miracle is dispensed, and a door is opened.

Chapter 33: Fall, Year 3

Chapter Summary

> Preparations are made. A perfect day is planned. A miracle is dispensed, and a door is opened.

Chapter Notes

> Are you all ready for some Danger Husbands?? Me too! But there are one or two things they need to do first...
>
> Tiny bit of NSFW, little bit of angst, whole pile of fluff! So, you know, pretty much the usual.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

"I'm gonna need you to repeat that," Charlie said.

His tone didn't seem to have any effect on the Wizard, seated across the kitchen table from them. It was hard to say if it had any effect on Qi, whose tinny voice was joining them via speakerphone. But Harvey knew: this was a tone that meant business. This was the tone that punched ex-boyfriends in the face and mowed down monsters. Even as his conscious brain mulled over the information Qi had just given them, a little thrill went down Harvey's spine at the danger in *that tone.*

He probably needed to discuss a few more things with his therapist.

"I understand that may come as a surprise," Qi's voice said, "but unfortunately it's outside our control."

"You think the thing is twenty or so floors down, and we have to get there in *one day?"*

The Wizard interjected here, putting his hands out in what was probably meant to be a placating gesture. "Skull Cavern is not the Pelican Town Mine," he said. "It was sealed off for good reason. Every inch of it is layered with powerful enchantments, too powerful even for me to undo. We cannot see precisely where the Beast is. All we know for sure is that every day, the pathways scramble. If you leave, you will find that nothing stays where you left it. You'll have to begin again."

"And there are no elevators," Harvey repeated.

“No.”

“Stairs?”

“Only leading up,” Qi said. Charlie flung his hands over his head.

“Only—that’s not how stairs work! Do you mean *escalators?”*

“Magic,” the Wizard said wearily. “You can ascend the stairs. You cannot descend them.”

Harvey could practically hear Charlie grinding his teeth; he reached over and rested a hand on his thigh, under the table. Charlie gave an impatient sigh.

“Look,” he said, “even on my best day in the mines, I never made it that far, that fast. That’s crazy. Unless there are no monsters at all, we’re not going to be able to dig our way down twenty floors in one day.”

“There are monsters,” Qi piped up helpfully. “Significantly more than there were in the mines, I’d wager.”

“Wonderful,” Charlie spat. “Remind me again why *you’re* not coming, Razmo? Because it seems to me we could really fucking use some *actual magic.”*

“I have explained this to you before. My own magical signature is strong enough to catch the attention of the Beast long before we could ever reach it. Yours are insignificant. I cannot accompany you without giving it warning of our approach.”

“More or less, it’s the Eye of Sauron, and bringing you would be like putting on the Ring?” Harvey asked, trying to be helpful. The Wizard glared at him.

“Are the two of you incapable of understanding anything without a *Lord of the Rings* metaphor?”

“Sorry. It’s just that we’re so *magically insignificant,”* Charlie huffed. “Seriously, though. If we can’t figure out a way to get through faster, this whole thing is over before it starts. I don’t think we’re going to solve it just by being really plucky and determined.”

“You could bomb your way through,” came Qi’s voice. The rest of the table fell silent, staring at the phone.

“When you say bomb,” Harvey began.

“Incendiary. Explosive. Something you light on fire and it explodes.”

Harvey looked from Charlie to the Wizard, feeling a sense of unreality descend. “Where on earth are we going to get *bombs?”* he asked. To his utter lack of surprise, Charlie pinched the bridge of his nose, squeezing his eyes shut as though he had a migraine.

“Believe it or not,” he said, “I think I know a guy.”

“Wonderful,” the Wizard deadpanned, before Harvey could ask any more questions about this frankly alarming statement. “Can you speak to him before tomorrow?”

“What’s tomorrow? Harvey asked. The Wizard blinked at him.

“We need to act as quickly as possible,” he said. “Every day, the Beast is gaining power. I see no reason to wait any longer than—”

“Hold up.”

“Tomorrow?”

“That’s not going to happen,” Charlie declared flatly. “Absolutely not.”

“Charlie, it is imperative that we move before—”

“We’re not moving at all,” Charlie interrupted, gesturing between himself and the Wizard. “This is on *us,* me and Harvey. And we need time to get ready. We can’t just drop everything and rush into this tomorrow.”

“You cannot expect—”

“A week,” Harvey said loudly, cutting off the argument. Both men turned to look at him, and Qi fell silent on the line. He cleared his throat, glancing across his face at Charlie. “We need one week to prepare. Charlie’s right, we need...we have things to get in order. All right? Give us a week.”

“It’s reasonable, Rasmodius,” came Qi’s voice. "We're asking a great deal." The Wizard turned his glare on the phone as though he could transmit his disapproval to Qi through the wires.

“Fine,” he ground out at last. “Take your week. Prepare yourselves. At six A.M. next Sunday, I will return here to convey you to the Desert.”

The front door burst open with a bang, and Charlie lurched through it, staggering under the bulk of a pile of bundles. “Jesus,” Charlie gasped, “you are not going to *believe* how much I’ve been running around today.”

Harvey thought he would, actually; he’d seen Charlie pass by the clinic door at least three times, looking increasingly flustered. He put down his wooden spoon and crossed the room to help him, holding out his arms. “Careful with that one,” Charlie cautioned, handing one package off to Harvey gingerly. “It might, um. Explode?”

“Oh, Yoba. Okay, let me...” Harvey shuffled quickly into the bedroom, placing the package on the floor of the closet and closing the door (as though *that* would stop a bomb, let alone multiple bombs). He returned to the living room to find Charlie slumping bonelessly on the couch, the other packages piled on the kitchen table. “I take it Krobus had the bombs, then.”

“Actually, he didn’t.” Charlie tilted his face up as Harvey passed, and Harvey paused long enough to give him a kiss on his way to the kitchen. “Well, I went to see Marlon and Gil first, thought they might have something. And I wanted to buy a new sword.”

“What was wrong with your old sword?”

“Honestly? Nothing, but if Qi’s footing the bill, I’m getting the best sword there is.”

“Fair.” Harvey peeked inside the longest bundle as he passed the table; he caught a glimpse of gleaming steel above a wicked-looking black hilt.

“They said it was forged in *lava,”* Charlie said, grinning over the back of the couch. “Probably marketing bullshit, but it sounds awesome, right?”

“It does.”

“Anyway, they didn’t have any bombs, so then I went to see Krobus. And *he* didn’t have any bombs either, but he said he knew this guy who lived in the mines—”

Harvey whipped around at this, forgetting about their dinner for the moment. *“Lived* in the *mines?”*

“That’s what I said! I told him I’ve been over every inch of that place and there’s nobody living there, but he said no, the guy lives behind this pile of rocks right inside the entrance. I’ve passed it a million times and never even thought about it. So I came home, got my pickaxe, went back up there, and turns out Krobus was totally right. There’s a dude in there.”

“I—what—” Harvey had so many questions, he couldn’t decide which one to voice first. Stupidly, his brain settled on, “What was his name?”

“Well, he told me he’s a Dwarf and that I wouldn’t be able to pronounce it. Like, an *actual Dwarf,* like with the ancient technology and stuff.”

It was a testament to the turns Harvey’s life had taken recently that he didn’t feel particularly shocked at this. “Of course,” he said faintly.

“Anyway, he *did* have bombs. Kind of a worrying amount of bombs, actually. And he didn’t seem to care at all about why I wanted to buy them, so I bought a lot.”

A lot. Harvey refrained from asking exactly how many; he had the feeling he really didn’t want to know. “Yoba, Charlie, should we keep them outside or something? Are they safe to have in the house?”

“They won’t explode unless we light them on fire, he said. I hope he’s right.”

Harvey hoped they weren’t about to blow themselves to kingdom come in Skull Cavern, but he kept this to himself. Maybe they’d be lucky, and they wouldn’t need to use the bombs at all. “Um. Do you want some soup?” he asked feebly, grasping for any tiny scrap of normalcy.

“Thanks, darlin’. It smells great.” Charlie stood up, stretching, and then seemed to remember something. “Oh! I got you some things, too.”

“Grenades?” Harvey joked, ladling out two bowls of pumpkin soup, and Charlie raised an eyebrow at him.

“Not exactly, but close.” He crossed to the table and opened the long bundle; Harvey set their bowls on the table, leaning over to look. The sword wasn’t the only weapon in the package—nestled in beside it, just as long but much less shiny, was a new club. Harvey picked it up carefully, testing its weight in his hands. It was lighter than the lead club he’d used before, but balanced differently, more of its weight toward the far end; he had no doubt that it would pack a wallop.

“This, too,” Charlie added, holding out a smaller, wrapped package. Harvey took it from him, carefully undoing the wrappings, and found a new slingshot. It was clearly very different from the one he already owned: it was made of a lightweight metal, with an extra-thick elastic cord, and looked far more like a weapon than something to play with at the Fair.

“You’re good with the slingshot, and you seemed to like the club better than the sword,” Charlie explained. “But if you’d rather have something else, we can swap it out.”

“No, this is...fine. Good. Thank you,” he added, feeling a little dazed. There was something about having weapons specifically bought *for him* that was tripping Harvey up. He’d fought alongside Charlie in the mines before, of course, but he’d done it to protect Charlie in an emergency, using Charlie’s hand-me-down weapons. This—planning an assault, buying tools of violence for that express purpose—it felt very, very different. Harvey had never envisioned himself as any kind of fighter. Even in his most elaborate Starfleet daydreams, he’d been firmly entrenched in Sickbay or a science station, not planetside wielding a phaser.

“Hey,” Charlie prompted him softly, taking his free hand, and Harvey looked up to see a knowing expression on his face. “I know it’s a lot. Try to remember why we’re doing this, okay?”

The knot in Harvey’s stomach loosened ever so slightly at this; Charlie was right. Even if the violence made him uncomfortable, he was still doing it to protect the ones he loved. He thought of the cornfield, imagined that misery extending over the entire town, choking the life and light from it. If he could stop that from happening, there was no question that he was making the right choice.

And if Charlie was going in, nothing could stop Harvey from following.

“I will,” he promised, giving Charlie a more genuine smile and squeezing his hand. “Now let’s eat. We need our protein if we’re going to use these things.”

“Roger that, Number One.”

The human body could do lots of things in a week. It could heal a minor abrasion, or lose a few pounds. It could grow hair one eighth of an inch. It could rid itself of a virus, shed an old layer of skin, produce new red blood cells.

But it couldn't pack on enough muscle to turn a middle-aged doctor into an action hero, even when said doctor had been farming part-time for a year and considered himself to be decently fit. (For the first time, Harvey had visible muscles in his back and chest, not just the smooth concave expanse he'd had before. He'd made an offhand remark about buying larger shirts, and Charlie had vehemently protested that idea, his eyes dark and hungry on Harvey's almost-straining buttons. It was nearly enough to give a guy self-confidence.)

Harvey had been practicing with the new club every day, and while he thought he was reasonably competent with it, there was no question that Charlie had the real upper-body strength between them. Faced with the conclusion that he wasn't going to make any significant changes to his biceps in the next five days, Harvey put his energy toward the slingshot instead. One of Charlie's more worn-out scarecrows had become the unfortunate target of his practice, and its stuffing now leaked out in dozens of places. On Wednesday morning, he took careful aim, spreading his feet apart into a wide stance. He pulled the pouch back, gauging the tension against the distance; he exhaled, steadied himself, and then let the pellet fly. It punched cleanly through the scarecrow's head, leaving a cloud of straw dust and torn burlap in its wake: his best shot yet.

"Damn, V!" called Charlie, who Harvey hadn't realized was watching. "You're getting *dangerous* with that thing." His husband approached from the direction of the house, flannel sleeves rolled up and sword strapped across his back. Harvey never could quite get over his amusement at seeing a man in old-school grunge clothes carrying a medieval weapon. When he reached Harvey, he held out his hands expectantly. "Let me try. I've been working on it, too."

Harvey wisely kept his thoughts to himself, handing over the slingshot and pellet bag without comment. Charlie spread his feet, took aim, and fired. The first shot sailed over the scarecrow's shoulder. The second bounced off the ground at its feet, and the third punched straight through a baby pumpkin twelve feet away. Harvey chanced a look at Charlie's face, which turned redder and more determined with every shot.

"I think maybe—"

"Shh!"

Not until he'd used up every last pellet in the bag did Charlie admit defeat, the scarecrow untouched. He flung the slingshot to the ground, fuming. "Look, it's okay," Harvey said placatingly, putting a hand on his shoulder. "You don't have to be good at everything, honey. We can just—"

Mid-sentence, Charlie stalked toward the scarecrow, hand going to the hilt of his sword. Without breaking his stride, he pulled the sword from the sheath, raised it over his shoulder, and executed a complex little spin maneuver. The scarecrow's top half toppled over into the foliage below, sliced clean through. Charlie stood panting, glaring down at it for a moment, before returning to Harvey's side. He tossed the hair out of his eyes, his mouth set in a line.

“I was always more of a tank than a DPS,” he declared.

Harvey fought down a grin. “It suits you,” he assured him, and leaned down to press a kiss to the top of his head. “I wish I were a *real* healer. It’d be nice to have some spells up my sleeve.” He had, actually, brought this up nervously to Rasmodius; the Wizard had given him such a withering look, he’d stammered an apology and changed the subject.

“I think a medical degree and a good first-aid kit are probably the next best thing.”

“Speaking of which, I need to restock my bag tomorrow. *Someone* insisted we ‘play doctor’ and messed up all my supplies.”

“I had a legitimate medical emergency!”

“An erection is not a medical emergency unless it lasts more than four hours,” Harvey reminded him.

“Okay, yes, but remember: an ounce of prevention is better than a pound of cure.”

“Yoba,” Harvey sighed in mock exasperation. “I suppose I can’t argue with that.”

The odd brand of gallows humor they’d developed around the situation evaporated, totally and without warning, on Friday morning. From the moment Harvey woke up, before he even opened his eyes, he could feel it: the heavy weight of dread had settled over him like a lead blanket. He wondered whether it was the Beast’s spreading influence, or just normal, sensible fear for what they were about to do. When he did at last crack his eyes open, he saw Charlie, wide awake and staring at him. Without speaking, he knew Charlie felt it too.

They went about their morning routine in near-silence, picking at breakfast and caring for the animals and tending to the crops. With their weapons ready and his medical bag packed, there was only one real task left to cross off their list, and it was one they’d both been putting off. Just after noon, he entered the farmhouse to find Charlie at the kitchen table, a sheaf of paper and a pen in front of him. Harvey sat down in the chair closest to him, and they stared down at the blank page for a long moment.

“It’s stupid,” Charlie said at last. His voice sounded unnaturally loud in the quiet of the house. “This is something we kind of needed to do anyway, but…”

“The timing makes it feel more real,” Harvey finished for him. Charlie nodded, fiddling with the pen. He glanced up at Harvey apprehensively.

“We’re probably not going to need it. Almost definitely.”

“I know.” Gently, Harvey stretched out his hand, offering; Charlie placed the pen in his palm. “Let’s just get this over with, my love. We’ll feel better when it’s done.”

And so, they spent the next hour writing out exactly what would happen if they both met their untimely demise in Skull Cavern. The farm, they’d decided, would go to Shane; he could run

it himself or use the land to build his eventual veterinary practice. The animals would go back to Marnie, with a note placing Bones specifically in Jas's care. The clinic and Harvey's old apartment, meanwhile, would go to Maru; he expected that she would sell it. Most of their money, they left to Charlie's mother. Harvey had wondered if Charlie might want to leave her the farm as well—after all, it had been her childhood home—but Charlie was adamant that it should go to someone who would appreciate it, who wouldn't immediately turn around and sell it off without ever setting foot in the place. They also wrote a letter, brief but painful, to have sent to the adoption agency in case they didn't make it.

When they'd finished their will, they walked hand-in-hand to Lewis's house, still mostly quiet. The envelope in Harvey's jacket pocket felt as though it weighed a thousand pounds. He looked down at Charlie, the golden afternoon light glinting off his hair, his shoulders tense in his flannel shirt. He thought about those shoulders, specifically the left one, what it had looked like when he'd been carried into the clinic, what it still looked like months later.

And he felt a certainty, bone-deep and solid as rock, that if anyone was going to get hurt this time, it was going to be himself. Not Charlie, not again. Whatever Charlie insisted to the contrary, the simple fact was that Harvey couldn't go on without him, and he was prepared to do whatever it took to get him out alive. The thought unexpectedly settled him. Charlie was the treasure hunter between the two of them; let him handle the search for the Prismatic Shard. Harvey would follow and focus on what *he* did best: keeping someone else safe and healthy.

Charlie turned his head, and Harvey belatedly realized he'd been staring. "You okay?" Charlie asked gently, jostling his hand, and Harvey gave it a squeeze in return.

"I'm okay."

"People usually make an appointment for this sorta thing," Lewis said, stripping off his gardening gloves and getting creakily to his feet. They'd caught him in the middle of weeding—beets, it looked like—and he seemed torn between annoyance at the interruption and curiosity at why they'd come to see him. Hospitality won out, though, and he invited them inside.

"Lemonade?"

"No, thank you," Harvey said politely.

"We just have a quick favor, and then we'll get out of your hair, Lewis," Charlie promised. "We're sorry to interrupt your afternoon, but we were hoping to get this taken care of today."

Lewis settled his reading glasses onto his nose, squinting down at the letter Harvey had spread out on the table. "You two writing a will?" he asked, glancing between them.

"Not a will, exactly," Charlie hedged. "We don't have an actual lawyer or official paperwork or anything, it's just kind of a…"

“Directive,” Harvey supplied. “Just basic instructions, until we can get a real will in order.”

“We just need you to be a witness for us signing it.”

Lewis went back to reading it, which Harvey had been kind of hoping he wouldn’t. The less they had to explain, the better, but Lewis always had been fairly nosy. (Harvey thought maybe the love of gossip was what had brought him and Marnie together in the first place.) When he finished, he straightened, pushing his glasses up his nose with a clouded expression.

“Are you boys all right?” he asked. “Something I should know?”

Harvey opened his mouth, but Charlie beat him to it. “We’re fine, Mayor Lewis,” he said, with a credible attempt at sincerity. “We’re just traveling the next few days, and we realized we should have put our wishes together a while ago. Just in case.”

“Traveling? Where to?”

A monster-infested hellhole half a mile under the Calico Desert, Harvey thought.

“The Calico Desert,” Charlie answered. It wasn’t a lie, at least.

Lewis continued to gaze at them in that scrutinizing way, and Harvey tried not to squirm under the microscope. At last, he picked up his pen, offering it to Charlie. Charlie signed the letter, Harvey added his own signature beside it, and finally, Lewis signed below their names, adding “WITNESS” in block letters. As he finished adding the date, he spoke again, his tone almost conversational.

“You know, fellas,” he said, “if anything ever *was* wrong, really wrong, I hope you know my door is open.” He pocketed the pen and his glasses, turning to Charlie. “I thought the world of your grandfather, Charlie, and I know you’re cut from the same cloth. I’m always here to help, if you’re in need.”

They had to go, *now,* before the weight of what they weren’t saying crushed them both. Harvey folded the letter and put it back in his pocket, throwing a meaningful glance at Charlie. “Thank you, Lewis, really. It means a lot,” Charlie said, a little thickly. “You don’t have anything to worry about. We’re fine.”

“Just being responsible,” Harvey added. Lewis nodded, clearly unsatisfied but letting it go.

“Okay, boys. You travel safe.”

“We will.”

That night in bed, they lay nestled together, Charlie’s back fitting snugly against Harvey’s front. Harvey stroked his fingers down Charlie’s side, not sleepy yet, content to just lie here and breathe in the scent of him. Some time later, Charlie rolled over to face him, resting a hand over Harvey’s heart.

“Question,” he began.

“Mm?”

“Obviously, we’re gonna make it,” he said, the corner of his mouth twitching up. “We’re going to get in and get the thing, and get out, and it’ll all be fine.”

“Obviously.” It wasn’t obvious at all, and both of them knew it, but they seemed to have settled on this mutual bravado as a coping mechanism. Harvey was going with it.

“But...if we weren’t. Going to make it, I mean.” Charlie swallowed, looking suddenly nervous. “How would you want to spend tomorrow? If it was our last day on earth?”

“That’s a big question.”

“I know. I mean it, though. What would you want to do, V? It’s not too late. We could go visit Maru and Shane in the city, go back to that jazz club. We could take another balloon ride, or, I don’t know, I bet Qi would put us up in the suite again. Anything you want.”

Harvey thought about it, because Charlie seemed so earnest. He considered all the memorable ways they could spend a day together. The sights they could see, places they could go, fantasies they could indulge. He let himself dip a single toe into the deep, black waters of *what if we don’t make it,* and imagined what he would have regretted in his final moments, what he would have wished for.

The answer came to him with startling clarity.

“You know what I’d really want to do?” he whispered.

“Tell me,” Charlie murmured back, stroking a hand through his hair. Harvey shifted closer, nuzzling into his palm.

“I’d live our life,” he said. “Just like it is. Just a normal day, just you and me. We’d take care of the animals, go for a walk, make dinner together. I’d dance with you. Take you to bed. That’s all I’d want, Charlie, just more of this. I’m so, so happy. I don’t need anything else.” He trapped Charlie’s hand and kissed it, meeting his eyes. “Is that a boring answer?”

Charlie shook his head on the pillow, eyes shining in the dim light. “It’s a perfect answer.”

And so they did. The next morning, they got up with Pizza’s crows, just like always. Though they normally split up in the morning to save time—Harvey caring for the barn animals, Charlie heading to the chicken coop—today, they stayed together. They held and stroked each individual chicken; they groomed and cooed over each of their cows, their goat, their sheep. They played with Bones, Harvey throwing sticks and Charlie chasing him down rows of wheat. When the dog flopped, happily exhausted, in the shade of the barn, Charlie and Harvey packed a lunch and strolled south.

They hadn't really had a destination in mind. The rickety little pier on the pond, maybe, or the Flower Dance meadow. The sun shone pleasantly warm, a light breeze blew through the changing leaves on the trees, and all in all, it felt as though the day had been arranged just for them. When they reached the pond, they found Elliott's little boat tied up to the end of the pier. Charlie raised an eyebrow, tilting his head in its direction.

"He always said we could use it," he pointed out.

They passed a few happy hours that way, first eating lunch on the pier, then pushing off in the boat. It floated lazily on the still water, turning in slow, aimless circles. Harvey sat in the bow, his back resting against the gunwale, and read aloud; Charlie lay stretched out with his head in Harvey's lap. It was romantic, idyllic, comfortable—everything Harvey had ever dreamed married life could be like, if he was very, very lucky. Not even the looming shadow of tomorrow could fully blot it out.

He paused in his reading; Charlie seemed to have dozed off. Harvey stroked the hair back from his peaceful face, lost in thought. They'd had two years together, almost exactly. It didn't seem like a terribly long amount of time to totally reinvent a person, and yet. Harvey had always regarded Charlie's appearance in his life as an absurd stroke of luck, and everything that happened afterward as an extension of that. If he was a better, happier, braver person than he'd been before, surely that was because Charlie had made him that way. But sitting in the boat, gazing down at his husband and feeling that same protective determination from yesterday wash over him, Harvey considered an alternate possibility for the first time. He remembered sitting outside the farmhouse a year ago, thinking that his happiness was a cosmic mistake, one that would inevitably be corrected. But was it possible he had it backward? Maybe the sad, shy, lonely version of Harvey was the fluke—the result of his parents' death, his uncle's indifference, a hundred other, smaller events in his life. Maybe this version—who loved and was loved, who worked hard to care for the humans and animals in his life, who went charging into monster-infested caves because it was the right thing to do—was the man Harvey had always been meant to be. Charlie had been the one to turn the key, Harvey was still certain of that, but perhaps the door had been there all along.

He suddenly felt certain: they could do this.

Bending over his lap, he pressed a kiss to Charlie's temple. Those beautiful brown eyes fluttered open, squinting a little against the sunlight. "Sorry, darlin,'" Charlie said blearily, smiling. "Did I fall asleep on you?"

"Only a little," Harvey murmured, returning the smile. "Come on. Let's head back. We can find you somewhere to nap where you won't get sunburned."

The dishes from dinner dripped dry beside the sink, a fire crackled in the hearth, and Bones lay curled on the couch. He kept a close eye on his two people, who were currently being extremely boring. Charlie and Harvey stood wrapped in each other's arms, turning slowly on the living room rug to one of Harvey's old Erroll Garner records. They were only paying half-attention to the music, the dancing really just a flimsy excuse to stare at each other and let their hands roam, but Erroll didn't seem to mind.

“I like this one,” Charlie was saying. “I don’t remember hearing it before.”

“I heard it live once, at a club in the city. The band was only okay, but we had fun anyway.”

“We?” Charlie prompted.

“I went with my friends from school. Rebecca—I told you about her, she was the one who didn’t believe I’d landed such a hot husband—Jane, Garrett, Keita.” He examined Charlie’s face, which had relaxed a tiny bit at the mention of his friends. “Honey, are you *jealous?* Were you worried I had some boyfriend I never told you about?”

“No!” Charlie insisted, though his cheeks tinted pink. “I was just curious! About your friends!”

“Of course,” Harvey agreed graciously. They swayed for a while longer, and when Harvey thought Charlie’s blush had died down enough, he leaned in to whisper in his ear. “I mean, I *did* end up leaving with someone that night,” he murmured. “Not a boyfriend, though. Actually, I’m not sure I ever caught his name.”

Charlie’s splutter of shock was extremely gratifying. “You did—wha— *you?”*

“I did tell you I had some flings,” Harvey said, fighting down a laugh. “What, did you think I was a priest until I met Philip?”

“No, no,” Charlie said, waving this away. “I knew that, I just never pictured you as the type to go home with a stranger.”

“Not *any* stranger,” Harvey said primly. “I was picky.”

“Oh, yeah?” Charlie smirked at him, an expression that usually boded very, very well for Harvey. A Pavlovian shiver ran down his spine at the sight of it. “What about me? If we’d met in a bar like that, I mean. Would you have come home with me?”

The answer, as Charlie knew perfectly well, was *hell yes,* but Harvey sensed he should play along with this little scenario. “Well, that depends,” he said, arranging his face into what he hoped was a contemplative expression. “You’d have to seduce me, of course.”

“Mm,” Charlie acknowledged. He settled his hands on Harvey’s waist, stepping in a little bit closer; as he did, he glanced up shyly through his lashes, biting his lip around a small smile. Harvey found himself suddenly, desperately grateful that Charlie had never given him *that* look before they were together. He would have found himself burnt to a smoldering pile of ash, probably. Charlie leaned up on his toes, brushing his face against the side of Harvey’s neck; Harvey felt his own pulse speed up in response.

“How would you like to be seduced?” Charlie whispered, letting his lips brush over the skin below Harvey’s ear. Harvey let out a long, shuddering breath, feeling Charlie’s eyelashes fall closed against his skin. “Should I do this?” He shifted his hips forward minutely—not enough to press against Harvey’s, just enough that Harvey could feel his heat, maddeningly close. “Or maybe I should just talk to you,” he continued, in that same breathy whisper in

Harvey's ear. It seemed to have a direct connection to Harvey's central nervous system; he felt it everywhere at once, shivering over his heated skin. "I could tell you how gorgeous you are. How I've been watching you all night…"

Harvey felt the tips of Charlie's fingers dip minutely below his waistband—nothing overt, nothing that couldn't be passed off as accidental, but broadcasting his intent. He moved to Harvey's other ear, never breaking contact with his skin, never quite kissing him. "How I've never wanted anyone more," he breathed, and drew back just enough to look Harvey in the eye. His gaze was hooded and dark, pupils dilated and lips flushed; he looked like sex itself, ready to take him home. Harvey was on *fire.* He couldn't take it any longer, he *had* to kiss him. As he leaned in, Charlie tipped his head back, deftly evading him with a wicked smile. He hooked two fingers in Harvey's belt loops, tilting his head toward the bedroom.

"It's crowded in here," he murmured. "Want to go somewhere?"

It didn't matter that it wasn't actually crowded, that they weren't actually strangers, that this wasn't actually a club. Harvey's answer had always been the same. *"Yes."*

It wasn't until much later—after Charlie had laid him on the bed, kissed him all over, spread him open, pushed smoothly inside him—that Harvey even remembered what was happening tomorrow. Such was Charlie's power over him: he could make Harvey forget his own name, let alone whatever danger loomed over them. Even then, it was a passing thought, acknowledged and then pushed aside in favor of more important data. There was so much of it to catalogue: the long moonlit line of Charlie's neck, his head thrown back; the tension in his forearms as they supported Harvey's splayed knees; the sparks Charlie's thrusts were sending up his spine. It reminded him of their first time together, two years ago in this same bed, when the only demons they were facing down were metaphorical.

After they had both come—Charlie's cock pulsing deep inside Harvey, sending him over the edge—Charlie gathered Harvey into his arms, kissing the shuddering breaths from his mouth. They lay like that for longer than Harvey could count, letting their heartbeats return to normal. Charlie eventually pulled back, just far enough to set his forehead against Harvey's, eyebrows drawn together above closed eyes. Harvey knew his face well enough to guess at what was going through his head, and sure enough, he drew a halting breath.

"V—" he began.

"Nope," Harvey interrupted. Charlie sighed impatiently.

"Look, there's no guarantee—"

"I know," he said, more gently, stroking a hand down Charlie's jaw; his husband's eyes opened, dark with worry. "I know. It's just—we don't need to do all that, Char. There's nothing we haven't said to each other." Charlie just stared at him, so Harvey pressed on. "You know that I love you, right?"

"Of course," Charlie whispered.

“And I know you love me. So what else is there?”

Something shifted in Charlie’s gaze; he tilted his head forward, burying his face in Harvey’s shoulder. “You’re right,” he whispered. Harvey stroked through his hair, trying to transmit comfort and calm through the simple touch. “It was a really good day,” Charlie added eventually.

“It was,” Harvey murmured into his hair. “Let’s do it again sometime.”

Harvey felt as though he had barely closed his eyes before Charlie was gently shaking him, voice low in his ear. “Wake up, darlin’,” he was saying. “It’s time.”

The sun still hovered below the horizon; even Pizza hadn’t risen yet. But a glance at the bedside clock told Harvey they had about forty-five minutes until the Wizard arrived. They went through their morning routine mostly silently, taking turns in the shower, making coffee, loving on Bones. Charlie opened the refrigerator, took out the basket of eggs, looked down at them, and put them back. Harvey understood the feeling. While yesterday he’d managed to summon some confidence, everything felt a lot more real and a lot more dangerous now that the day had arrived. He wasn’t sure his own stomach could tolerate much.

They went through their bags—Charlie’s backpack, Harvey’s medical bag, and a second, smaller satchel to hold their bombs—making sure everything was accounted for. Bottles of water, a coil of rope, protein bars, a suture kit: they had packed everything they could reasonably carry, and Harvey hoped they wouldn’t need half of it. *Especially* the explosives. He had just opened his mouth to ask Charlie whether he thought they should bring some more bandages when there was a knock at the door.

The Wizard had been to their house before, but he didn’t look any less out of place this time around. His eyes swept over the supplies on the table; in lieu of an actual greeting, he asked, “Do you have everything you need?”

The lack of pleasantries suited Harvey just fine, as he still wasn’t feeling particularly pleasant toward the man. Charlie looked, if possible, even less happy to see him. “Good morning to you too,” he grumbled. “I think we do. Unless you happen to have a miracle up your sleeve, because I think we’re gonna need it.”

“As a matter of fact, I do,” Rasmodius said unexpectedly. He reached into a leather pouch at his waist, extracting a tiny pink bottle. As far as miracles went, it didn’t look like a particularly powerful one. Honestly, it looked more like Pepto-Bismol than anything else; Harvey hoped the Wizard hadn’t just decanted some into an old-timey bottle with a cork.

“What is it?” Charlie asked.

“This,” he said pompously, “is Life Elixir. Simple to make, at least in technique, but produced from exceptionally rare ingredients. It will bring someone back from the very brink of death, and restore them fully. The *brink* of death,” he repeated, giving each of them a hard look. “Not death itself. Do not wait. Once brain death occurs, even this can’t save you.”

Charlie glanced at Harvey, raising one eyebrow in a silent *is this bullshit?* Harvey shrugged, as subtly as he could. They were outside his area of expertise now, in almost every possible way. Charlie reached out to take the bottle, nestling it carefully inside his backpack.

"How many doses are in there?" he asked. The Wizard gave him an incredulous look.

"One," he said impatiently. "I did just tell you it was exceedingly rare, didn't I?"

"There are two of us," Charlie complained. "You can't even give us one each?"

"I would advise you to try *not* to almost die more than once."

"You're welcome to head in there and try it yourself."

"As we have discussed—"

"Let's get going," Harvey interrupted wearily, settling the medical bag and bomb satchel on his shoulder. "Okay? It's going to take us a while to get to the Desert."

"Actually, it isn't," the Wizard said, and raised his arm. Before Harvey could question what he meant, he drew it in a wide circle, then made a chopping motion straight down through the center. All at once, the circle he'd drawn in the air blazed as though it were a flaming circus hoop, and in the center—

"Holy shit," Charlie gasped. "Okay. Maybe you actually can do magic."

"I'm glad we've finally established that."

A desert sunrise poured its light out of the hoop into their kitchen; dunes stretched away into the distance, and just ahead were the bluffs seen from the back windows of the Oasis. Harvey reached out a tentative hand, crouching down, and touched the sand: it was real, still cool from the night, a breeze stirring its surface. He looked up at Charlie, who nodded and shouldered his backpack.

"After you, Number One," he said, and Harvey went through.

He didn't know what he'd *expected* passing through a magic portal to feel like, but it felt like nothing: like walking through a doorway. The desert was chilly, still waking up, and he shivered in his jacket. Behind him, he heard Charlie's footsteps on the sand, and then his hand was at the small of Harvey's back. Harvey smiled weakly down at him, trying to look more confident than he felt.

"Gentlemen, I'm glad there were no issues with your transport," came a familiar voice. They turned to see Qi, bundled in a long coat and striding toward them. "I trust your preparations went smoothly."

"More or less," Charlie said.

"It was good of you to come. We are all in your debt today." Rasmodius, apparently having followed them through the portal, stopped beside him. Harvey looked back, but the portal

was gone; all he could see was the lurid pink back of the Oasis, far in the distance. “Time is of the essence, so I won’t waste it on pleasantries,” Qi continued. “Is there anything we can do for you before you enter?”

“Yes,” Harvey said, stepping forward. He reached into his jacket pocket, pulling out the will they’d written, and handed it over to Qi. “If we don’t—if something happens to us, please deliver that to our friends Shane and Maru. They live in the city; Mayor Lewis can help you find them.”

“Of course,” Qi said, tucking the letter into his own coat. “I give you my word.”

“Thank you.”

“Now, please follow me,” he continued, setting off across the sand. They didn’t have long to wonder about their destination. Less than a dozen yards away, set into the cliffside, was a doorway—one shaped alarmingly like a jagged, gaping maw. Maybe they were just stalactites, but Harvey had monsters on the brain, and all he could see was a great stone mouth waiting to swallow them. A glance at Charlie, who was unusually quiet and pale, told him he wasn’t alone.

They passed through the doorway and into a small stone chamber. The walls dripped with damp, and it was lit by a single dim torch. On the far wall stood an iron door, emblazoned with—

“Okay, I get it’s the name, but did they really have to put fucking *skulls* on everything?” Charlie demanded, as their party came to a stop. “What was this place originally, anyway? A mine?”

The Wizard and Qi looked at each other, which Harvey now knew meant they had information he and Charlie weren’t going to like. “No one knows exactly,” Qi said slowly.

“But,” Harvey prompted, because there was clearly a *but.*

“A tomb seems most likely,” Rasmodius finished.

A *tomb.* Harvey was afraid of the *haunted maze* in the town square. He fought down a hysterical and inappropriate urge to laugh; could they have found a worse candidate for this job?

“Cool,” Charlie said, his tone dripping with sarcasm. “That’s great. Thanks for the heads up, we really appreciate it.”

“Would knowing have changed your preparations at all? Or your decision?” the Wizard asked wearily. “Anyway, we *don’t* know. No one has entered the cavern in years, possibly decades. Just go in, stay alert, and retrieve the Shard, and you’ll be fine.” Qi glanced at him, and he sighed. “Most likely,” he amended irritably.

“And try very, very hard not to engage it in combat,” Qi added.

“Yes. Stealth will be your best option, by far.”

Charlie looked at Harvey, raising an eyebrow in a silent question. But as far as Harvey was concerned, there wasn't one. Whether the cave was full of gemstones or corpses, they had work to do. Reaching into his pocket, he took out the key. He put it into the keyhole, half-hoping it wouldn't fit—but of course it did, turning as though it had been oiled yesterday. The door swung open on silent hinges, somehow more unnerving than if they'd been creaky. Beyond the circle of torchlight, he could make out what looked like sandstone walls, a floor made of flagstones, and not much else.

"Best of luck, gentlemen," Qi said behind them. "We'll be waiting for your safe return."

Beside him, Charlie squared his shoulders and shifted his backpack. He reached over and took Harvey's hand, gripping it tightly. "Ready?" he asked, and though his face was pale, his voice was steady. Harvey nodded, holding his gaze.

"Ready."

They stepped through the door.

Chapter End Notes

Aaaand here we go! We're going to spend a couple of chapters in Skull Cavern, and I think you're going to see the chapter count go up tomorrow (I realized my next chapter as written is 16k, RIP). Thanks so much for your lovely comments yesterday! I'm really happy so many of you are looking forward to the magic/adventure element. I know we're getting close to the end chapter-count-wise, but we still have around 60k words to go! (Fun fact: the amount remaining in this story is about the same amount as my ENTIRE first story on AO3, which took me years to write. Jeez.)

Tomorrow: the boys find out what's inside Skull Cavern.

Chapter 34: Fall, Year 3

Chapter Summary

The boys find out what's inside Skull Cavern.

Chapter Notes

Adventure time! The fellas are heading into some dangerous territory. Expect some monster-fighting violence, some blood, and generally a lot of peril. You've been warned! (Or promised, if you're into that sort of thing.)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Fucking magic escalators,” Charlie grumbled.

“Rasmodius did say it wouldn’t work,” Harvey reminded him.

“We had to *try,* though, right?”

They stood at the top of the staircase in Skull Cavern, peering down into the depths. The stairs looked sturdy, carved from the sandstone, and well-lit. What a pleasant stroll that would be, Charlie thought. Just a straight shot down to the twentieth floor, grab the stone, get back out. But of course, because the god of magic was a total dick, the stairs repelled them as thoroughly as a brick wall. They could literally lean against the empty air and walk in place; it was the weirdest sensation Charlie had ever encountered.

“Ladder it is,” he sighed, and they returned to the main chamber. The first floor was, blessedly, empty of monsters: just some sandstone brick and flickering torches. Who kept the torches lit? How did they not consume their posts? Charlie didn’t have answers for these questions, and he honestly didn’t care. He just hoped the floors below this one would prove equally mundane.

The ladder to the second floor was in plain sight, tucked in a corner near a pile of crates. Charlie descended first, keeping his head on a swivel, into another chamber made of sandstone brick. As Harvey climbed down behind him, he scanned the room for both enemies and ladders; he didn’t immediately see either, but he *did* see a lot of possibly ladder-hiding rocks. He unhooked the pickaxe from his backpack, stepping forward.

A strange sort of whooshing sound made the hairs on Charlie’s arms stand up, and he turned just in time to see a pellet from Harvey’s slingshot go whizzing by. It struck something long,

green, and flying, which fell out of the air and skidded heavily to a stop a few feet away. Whatever it was, it twitched horribly on the ground; Charlie stepped closer, pulling his sword from its sheath, and saw that it was—

"Is that a *dragon?"* Harvey asked behind him, and while Charlie wasn't a monster expert, it seemed like maybe yes? The thing was five feet long, green and scaled, with antennae almost the length of its body. It wasn't immediately obvious what allowed it to fly—Charlie couldn't see any wings—but then who knew what made a Squid Kid fly, anyway? It was clear what had made it *stop* flying: Harvey's pellet had struck it right between the eyes. Its thrashing looked so painful, Charlie almost felt sorry for it, even as he was impressed again by his husband's marksmanship. He finished it off with his sword, then turned back to Harvey.

"Nice shot."

"Thank you." Harvey looked around, another pellet at the ready. "That wasn't so bad. Not that different from the giant bugs in the mine, really."

The whooshing noise sounded again, and Charlie hoisted his sword into position. "Glad you feel that way, because it looks like we've got a few more coming," he said. From around a corner, three more of the serpent-dragon-things appeared. "You take the one on the right, I'll take the two on the left?"

"Got it!"

They really *weren't* so bad. It was undeniably kind of spooky to see a giant serpent gliding through the air at you, and Charlie wished they made a little more noise, but they went down easily enough and didn't seem to spit fire or anything. As they dispatched the second wave, Charlie began to feel a little optimistic. Maybe the danger had been overstated; maybe there wasn't anything in here tougher than the monsters he'd faced in the mines. (Except the Void Beast, probably, but he didn't plan on facing it at all if he didn't have to.) The ladder turned out to be tucked around the corner, not hidden under a rock at all, and Charlie was pleased to have descended two floors in under ten minutes.

His good mood lasted until the fourth floor. They'd broken a handful of rocks, searching for the ladder, when Charlie heard a legitimately terrifying noise: a sort of raspy, wheezing groan, not unlike the noises zombies always made in movies. Harvey's hand went to his arm, squeezing hard enough to hurt, and Charlie instinctively looked at his face; it was horrified and pale, his eyes round.

"Ch—Ch—" he stammered, apparently unable to get anything further out.

Charlie followed his husband's shocked gaze, and felt his own blood freeze in his veins. Shuffling toward them, slowly but surely, were a group of what Charlie could only identify as *mummies.* Blackened, shriveled bodies peeked out from beneath stained old wrappings, their fingers grasping and clawing. Suspicions confirmed, then: it *was* a tomb.

"Here goes," Charlie sighed, and rushed at the nearest mummy. He slashed out with his sword, taking one of its arms off with a single stroke; with the next stroke, he removed its head. Fortunately, they didn't seem to be any more durable than one would expect from a

thousand-year-old corpse, and they moved slowly. Charlie took three of them out in rapid succession, watching Harvey snap out of it and get to battling another group out of the corner of his eye. When at last they'd reduced the horde to a pile of wrappings and limbs, they looked at each other. Harvey was sweating despite the chill of the room.

"Mummies," he said shakily. Charlie gave him a rueful smile.

"Afraid so. At least they're not that tough?"

"Not especially, no."

Charlie squinted around, scanning for any likely-looking rocks. "Any sign of the—"

"Charlie!" Harvey shouted, and one of his slingshot pellets went whizzing over Charlie's shoulder. He turned to see it bury itself in the upper arm of a mummy, standing inches away from Charlie. How had he missed it the first time? They weren't very stealthy, so how could it have snuck up on him?

But as Charlie took the head off the mummy, he noticed something else. The piles of remains were *moving.* A torso with one arm attached picked up a head and settled it back onto its shoulders; an intact mummy that Harvey had beaten to a pulp got up, examined its obviously broken arm, and snapped it dispassionately back into place. The moment they had righted themselves, they advanced on Charlie and Harvey again.

"What the *fuck!"* Charlie snapped, thoroughly rattled now. He set to work again, tearing through one mummy after another, making extra sure to destroy as much of their bodies as possible. From eight feet away, he heard Harvey repeating a stammering *oh my god, oh my god* as he swung away. Charlie was no expert theologian, but he thought that if they'd reached the realm of mummies that could reanimate themselves and attack you, God probably wasn't around these parts much.

When the last mummy had fallen, he backed away from the pile as Harvey did the same; they stood together, his hand gripping Harvey's forearm, and waited. To Charlie's horror, it was only a few moments before the pile began stirring again, reassembling itself for a third assault.

"Let's get out of here!" Charlie barked, turning and dragging Harvey along after him. They ran along a narrow corridor, searching for the ladder, but couldn't find it. Charlie smashed several boulders with his pickaxe, horribly aware of the shuffling and groaning of the mummy horde closing the distance between them—and now they were trapped in a hallway, with the only known exit on the other side of the mummies. They could fight them off again, of course, but how many times?

"There has to be a way down," he said desperately, taking aim at another boulder. "Keep looking. Maybe down at the other end of the hall—"

"Maybe not," Harvey groaned, and Charlie heard it: the mummy sounds weren't coming from only one direction anymore. They were clearly audible, dragging and moaning and clawing at the walls, from the other end of the hallway.

“Fuck,” Charlie snapped, spinning on the spot. “How many are there? Can you take that group? I can try to hold these guys off.”

“Look,” Harvey gasped, setting off at a run. Charlie chased after him, and they found themselves at the edge of a hole. It was around the same shape and size as the ladder holes between floors, but there was no ladder in sight. Charlie couldn’t gauge the distance between them and the bottom in the dim light, but he *could* make out rushing water at the bottom. He turned to Harvey, who had gone pale and shaky again.

“It’s—that might be—it’s a big fall,” he said weakly. Charlie nodded, reaching for his backpack.

“We can tie the rope to one of those stalagmites and climb down. Okay? We don’t have to jump, we can just—”

But at that moment, the second group of mummies rounded the bend in the corridor. There were dozens of them, too many to count, and they were closing in. Charlie looked over his shoulder; the original mummies were within slingshot distance now, maybe fifteen feet away. If he took the time to set up a climbing rope, they weren’t going to make it.

“Never mind,” he said briskly, grabbed Harvey tightly by the hand, and jumped.

It wasn’t as long of a drop as Charlie had feared, although still plenty long; poor Harvey let out a harrowing scream as he toppled over the edge. The water surged up to meet them, and Charlie thought to himself *deep, deep, let it be deep, no broken ankles please—*

It *was* deep. They plunged through the surface, cool but not frigid, and just barely scraped their toes against the bottom before clawing back toward the surface. Somewhere in all this, Charlie lost his grip on Harvey’s hand. As his head broke through to the air, he pushed the wet hair from his eyes, and then he realized: the water was also *fast.* He was being swept along at a rapid clip, something he hadn’t noticed while he was still underwater. The water cut through a sort of subterranean canyon here, high stone walls rising on either side with no clear way out. But Charlie was more concerned with—

“Harvey!” he shouted, catching sight of a familiar head of soaked brown hair. His husband was maybe a dozen yards further downriver, about to be swept around a bend. Charlie’s heart leapt into his throat with panic—was he conscious? Was he drowning?—but then one of Harvey’s arms shot into the air, waving at him.

“Charlie! Are you all right?”

Flooded with relief, Charlie struck out after him as best he could while still wearing shoes and a backpack. “I’m coming! See if you can slow yourself down!” If a lifetime of movies had taught Charlie anything, it was that they were definitely going to be swept over a waterfall or some other kind of hazard, and he felt like their odds were better together. As he came around the bend himself, he saw Harvey again, scrabbling his fingers against the canyon wall. He wasn’t making much progress against the current, but it did seem to be slowing him down a little; Charlie was beginning to narrow the gap between them.

Harvey was clearly okay, more or less. As Charlie neared him, he saw that he'd managed to hang onto his glasses (a worry Charlie hadn't considered until half a second after he'd pulled them over the edge), and his only visible injury was a thin bleeding line they'd dug into his nose—probably on impact with the water. He seemed to be struggling with the unwieldiness of his two bags, but he didn't look in danger of drowning. Charlie stopped swimming, allowing himself to be pulled into Harvey's arms by the current. They collided into the canyon wall, gripping each other's arms as tightly as they could.

"Are you hurt?" Harvey asked, raising his voice over the roar of the water as they were dragged along. Charlie shook his head.

"You?"

"No!"

Well, that was one question answered. The bigger one, unfortunately, was how they were going to get out of the river, or spring, or whatever the hell it was. The water seemed to be getting more shallow here; occasionally, the tips of Charlie's toes dragged against the sand beneath them. Initially, this seemed like good news. But on closer examination, it wasn't only the floor that was changing height. Harvey noticed it at the same time Charlie did.

"Is it me, or is the ceiling…"

"It's getting lower," Charlie finished heavily, because of *course* it fucking was. The floor and ceiling had begun to slope up to meet each other. Logically, Charlie knew, there had to be an opening for the water to flow through. But how big that opening was—and where it went—was anyone's guess.

They weren't going to be kept in suspense for long. Already, as Charlie frantically tried to formulate a plan, he could see the choke point: a wide, but very squat opening in the rock, with total darkness behind it. Letting themselves be carried into that mysterious gap seemed like the worst idea anyone had ever had, but it wasn't as though they had options; they couldn't fight the current enough to go backward, and there was nowhere to climb up to even if they'd managed to scale the sheer walls.

"Are we even going to *fit?"* Harvey demanded, his voice high and panicked. Charlie eyed the opening, calculating, and came up with a plan. A stupid plan, to be sure, but it was something.

"Take your bags off!" he ordered. "Pass them over to me!" Mercifully, Harvey did what Charlie asked with no questions. Charlie took the dangling ends of Harvey's bag straps and knotted them quickly through the straps of his backpack, and then hooked his elbow through the tangled mess. "Hang onto that and lie down! Don't let go, no matter what!"

Harvey did, looking pale but determined. "As your doctor," he called, "I'd strongly advise you not to drown!"

"I'll do my best!"

Then they were swept through the opening, and it felt like a very real, very terrifying version of an amusement park ride. What Charlie had hoped was just a narrow hole leading to a wider chamber turned out to be a pitch-black tunnel. They went over a small drop as they entered it, and he could tell from their echoing screams that it was at least larger than the opening had been, but beyond that it was impossible to tell anything: up from down, left from right. His fingers searched across the flotsam of their packs and found Harvey's, and they intertwined them tightly enough to hurt. The current felt, if anything, even faster here. They bounced off a bend in the tunnel and found themselves facing backward into the current, collided again and spun off sideways. The two of them were a cork, bobbing hopelessly and unable to do anything to steer themselves.

Charlie's knee collided hard with an underwater rock, and he felt both his jeans and his skin split open. "Fuck!" he hissed, earning a cry of alarm from Harvey. "It's okay, just a stupid rock, just—"

"Wait, is that light?" Harvey shouted, pointing, and Charlie realized he could *see* Harvey pointing. He followed the direction of his finger, and sure enough, there was a sliver of light up ahead. It looked a bit murky, why was it so murky?

Oh. Because it was—

"Underwater," Charlie groaned, and Harvey let out a similar noise of dismay. "Jesus. Okay."

"We have to try, there's no other way."

"I know." He squeezed Harvey's fingers, then let go of them, gripping the strap of the backpack. The sliver of light rushed toward them, and it became clear that they were headed for a solid stone wall unless they dove soon. "On the count of three, okay? One—two—three!"

He dove beneath the surface, dragging the tangle of packs underneath with him. God, it was a tiny gap, smaller than the tunnel's entrance; his stomach scraped against the sand as he fought his way through it. Once he'd kicked his feet through to the other side, he was relieved to see Harvey swimming ahead of him—but then they both jerked backward, caught by the straps of their bags, which were jammed in the gap. Charlie gritted his teeth, fighting back the stream of swear words that came to his lips. He turned against the current, bracing his feet against the sides of the opening and pulling with all his might. Beside him, Harvey did the same. Charlie felt a spike of real panic well up. They couldn't lose their backpacks, it would be suicide, they would never—

A silvery flash caught his eye, and he saw that Harvey had pulled a pocketknife from somewhere. He pushed his head and shoulders through the gap, his legs thrashing; then, all at once, the whole mass came free. Bags, knives, and husbands went careening through the water, and Charlie went with them. He didn't stop to find out if Harvey needed help: he just seized him by the back of his jacket and kicked out hard for the surface.

Their heads broke through, both of them gasping for breath. Charlie had barely had a moment to fill his lungs before another sharp bend in the river appeared before them, but this time—at the elbow, that was—

“Charlie! Swim!” Harvey yelled breathlessly, striking out toward the narrow strip of beach that sloped down to meet them. If they let themselves be swept past it, they would enter another canyon, and God only knew where that would spit them out. But dead ahead, just a few yards away, they could get out. Harvey wasn’t as strong as Charlie, but his long limbs helped a lot in the water; his feet touched down while Charlie was still six feet away, and he pulled himself out onto the beach. Charlie fought as hard as he could, but the current was just too fucking strong and his legs were too fucking short, he wasn’t going to make it. Wiping the water away from his glasses, Harvey saw what was happening, and shot to his feet.

“V!” Charlie bellowed, summoning his strength. “Catch!” He swung the backpacks in a wide, awkward arc as he swept past, and it was enough: Harvey caught the dangling, sawed-off handle of Charlie’s bag, bracing his feet and towing it in against the current. Twice, he stumbled, and Charlie worried they would both be thrown back in—but at last, Harvey’s fingers closed around his arm, hauling him backwards into a soggy pile on the sand.

They lay there for an amount of time Charlie couldn’t track, their chests heaving. His left arm was flung over Harvey’s ribs, and his right leg was tangled between both of Harvey’s. The backpacks lay half on top of him. Water clogged every one of his orifices. He felt like something washed up from a shipwreck, which he supposed was more or less what he was.

“Jesus,” he gasped at last. “That was...insane.”

“Completely,” Harvey agreed. After a beat of silence, something in his tone struck Charlie as suspicious; he raised his head off the sand, squinting. Harvey’s facial expression looked oddly tight, as though he were fighting back tears. Or...wait. Not *tears.*

“Are you *laughing* right now?”

“No!”

“V.”

Harvey struggled a moment longer, looking at him shiftily. “I mean. It was very scary, and very dangerous. The jump was terrifying. And I’m soaked, but...it wasn’t the *least* fun thing I’ve ever done?”

Charlie stared at him, and his incredulous face seemed to push Harvey over the edge. He dissolved into a fit of hysterical giggles, right there on the sand, and apparently they were contagious, because Charlie couldn’t help joining in. They laughed so hard Charlie’s overtaxed lungs ached, his eyes welling up. When their fit finally subsided, he propped himself up on his elbows, looking down at Harvey.

“You fucking madman,” he said affectionately. “I can’t believe I married such a lunatic.”

“You did, though.”

“And I’d do it again, believe you me.”

Harvey grinned at him and pushed himself up to sitting, dropping a kiss on Charlie's temple in passing. "Did all our stuff make it okay?" he asked, pulling the tangled mess of bags toward himself. "I'm sorry I had to cut through your strap. I can fix it, if we have time."

"Don't apologize. You saved us back there." They spent the next few minutes examining their bags; fortunately, nothing seemed to be missing, just waterlogged. Harvey had insisted on sealing their medical supplies and bombs into plastic bags, which Charlie had thought overkill at the time—they were going to the desert, how were they going to get *wet?*— but was now desperately grateful for. After checking that the bombs had stayed dry, he pulled his lighter from his pocket and tested it. Mercifully, it worked.

"Sucks that we have to do the rest of it in wet clothes. And shoes," Charlie sighed, as Harvey worked at the strap of his backpack with a suture needle and thread. "What time is it? I wonder if we can rest for a few minutes."

Harvey checked his (fortunately water-resistant) watch, frowning. "Just about nine," he said. "Not too bad. We could probably take—"

He stopped speaking and cocked his head, listening, and then Charlie heard it: a groan from the shadows, shuffling footsteps. Charlie turned, facing away from the river, and watched it emerge into the light. As far as he could tell, it was just the one mummy; it shambled toward him with a grim, brainless determination.

"Would you *please* just *fuck off,"* Charlie snapped. God, today was going to be exhausting. Without really stopping to consider it, he plucked a tiny cherry bomb from the bag, lit it, and flung it at the mummy.

He'd only wanted to blow off some steam, maybe watch the thing fly to pieces. But the bomb rolled to a stop between the mummy's legs, exploded in a burst not much larger than a firecracker—and when the smoke cleared, it was gone.

"Wait," Charlie said slowly, getting to his feet. Beside him, Harvey did the same. "What?" They approached the scorch mark on the cavern floor where the mummy had once been, but all that remained were a few scraps of stained linen. The fire seemed to have totally disintegrated it.

"Well," Harvey said, sounding impressed. "I didn't think I'd ever say this, but...thank Yoba we brought the bombs?"

The knowledge that the mummies were, in fact, killable was a game-changer. They still did their best to evade them—they only had so many bombs, after all, and Charlie wanted to save some for digging through floors if they had to—but it was immensely satisfying, in a morbid way, to fling a bomb into the middle of a mummy horde. They made their way through several floors with nothing but the occasional mummy disposal or flying serpent, once accidentally blowing up a boulder that covered the ladder in the process. (They'd blown up a chunk of the ladder, too, but fortunately not so much they couldn't climb down.)

Ninety minutes or so passed, and Charlie began to feel good about the time they were making again. His mood improved even further when they arrived at a floor with no enemies in sight. The path ahead twisted and turned, and they walked with their weapons raised, but nothing jumped out at them. It was as though whatever demon ran the place had decided to give them a rest stop.

As they came around the last bend in the path, it widened into an enormous stone chamber, the biggest yet. Stalactites hung dripping from the ceiling, the same magical torches burned along the walls, and stretching across the room in front of them was—

"Nope," Harvey said, shaking his head and backing up. "No. No way."

A chasm, bigger than Charlie had ever imagined seeing underground; it seemed as though the entire desert should have fallen in by now. It reached from one side of the chamber to the other, and stretched thirty or forty feet across. Charlie approached it cautiously, peering down over the edge. He couldn't even see the bottom: it was deep enough that the light didn't reach it. Curious, he picked up a pebble and tossed it into the depths.

If it eventually hit bottom, he didn't hear it.

"Well," he said, sighing. "This is inconvenient." He turned, intending to ask Harvey what he thought they should do, and was momentarily confused when he couldn't find him—but there he was, all the way back inside the narrow tunnel, peering out around the corner as though something would drag him over the edge by force. Charlie crossed back to him, steeling himself for what was almost definitely not going to be a fun conversation.

"V," he began.

"There has to be another way around," Harvey interrupted, his voice shaking. "We can't cross that."

"I think there's a ledge over to that side we can use. See?" Charlie pointed at the chamber wall, where a ledge of rock about six inches wide jutted out along its length. Harvey looked at him as though he'd lost his mind.

"Are you *joking?* It's not—that's so—we can't. No. Let's look for another way."

"Okay, sure," Charlie agreed, because it seemed like the most expedient way to get things moving. He didn't *want* to shuffle his way across a tiny ledge with nothing between himself and open air, obviously. But the level design in this place had been just perverse enough thus far that he felt sure there wasn't another way.

They looked in every nook and cranny, broke every boulder, but Charlie had been right: the only way forward was across the chasm, as far as they could tell. Charlie looked at Harvey, both of them standing a safe distance from the edge. Their day-to-day life didn't involve many heights; the last time they'd encountered this fear of Harvey's was in the hot air balloon, two years ago. But he'd managed to get past it then. Couldn't he do it now?

“Look, darlin’,” he said to his pale and shaking husband. He pointed across the chasm. “There’s a stalagmite over there, see it? We could throw a rope around it, and then tie it to this one over here, and then we could hang onto the rope when we cross. It’ll be safe.” Safe-ish at best, honestly, but whatever calmed Harvey down.

Harvey wasn’t buying it, though. *“Safe?* That’s not safe. That’s—we’re underground!” he shouted, flinging his hands in the air. “We’re in a cave! Why is there a fucking canyon in a cave?” Charlie almost never heard him swear outside of sex; it was a marker of how upset he was. He reached for Harvey, putting a hand on his arm and feeling a growing helplessness.

“Baby, we *have* to get over there,” he said, as gently as he could. They’d already lost half an hour down here, looking for ladders; they couldn’t wait anymore. “I know it’s scary. I don’t want to do it either. But we don’t have a choice.” Harvey just stared down into the bottomless depths, looking slightly green, and Charlie decided it was time for action.

It turned out he had no fucking idea how to make a lasso. It was one of those “farm things” he’d never had to learn; all their animals just went where they were supposed to. He felt a brief, fierce stab of homesickness, thinking of Goose and Belle snuggled up in the barn. Had they really left them just this morning? After half a dozen failed attempts, he managed to get a knot he was reasonably sure would hold, and then spent another ten minutes trying to throw the thing around the stalagmite. He was sweating with exertion and rage by the fifteenth time he missed it; Harvey covered his hands with his own, pulling the rope from his grip.

“Let me try?”

Even shaking and nauseous, Harvey was better with distances. He got the rope looped around the stalagmite on his third try. “When we get home, I’m taking you to a carnival. You’re going to win us a fortune at ring toss,” Charlie said, wiping his forearm across his sweaty brow. Harvey gave him a small, forced smile.

“Maybe with slightly lower stakes.” They got the rope tied off, making a sort of shitty makeshift railing along the ledge. It was nothing Charlie wanted to lean on for too long, but he was reasonably certain it would work for the minute or so they’d need to cross.

“Just follow me, okay, Number One?”

But Charlie had gotten three steps out onto the ledge when Harvey let out a petrified whimper behind him. He turned his head to find his husband doubled over, head between his knees, and shaking from head to toe. Charlie hurried back to solid ground, reaching for him.

“Charlie, I can’t, I *can’t,”* he groaned, muffled into his knees. “I’m sorry, I just—it’s so high—I’m trying, but I get close, and it feels like I’m going to faint, and—”

“Shh, shh. Deep breaths. Okay? Breathe, darlin’.” He rubbed circles into Harvey’s back, keeping his voice calm despite his mounting desperation. “Just take a second.”

Harvey’s breathing evened out a moment later, and he lifted a blotchy and red face, his expression ashamed. “I’m so sorry,” he repeated, his voice only marginally more steady. “I don’t want to let you down.”

The words sent a stab of pain through Charlie's heart. "You have never let me down, not for a moment," he said firmly, crouching down at his eye level. "We're going to get through this. I promise." He leaned forward to press a kiss to Harvey's forehead, and Harvey leaned into the touch, brow furrowed miserably.

"How?" he whispered.

"Here's what we're going to do," Charlie said, with more confidence than he felt. "I'm going to cross first, so you can see how it works. Okay? Then I'll come back for you, and we'll go across together."

"I can't make you cross *three times,"* Harvey insisted, somehow paling even further. "It's dangerous enough once."

"It'll be okay. I'll show you." He got to his feet, turning around and squaring his shoulders before taking hold of the rope.

"Charlie, *wait!"*

They couldn't wait any longer. It felt heartless, but Charlie ignored him, stepping out onto the ledge. Jesus, the thing really *was* narrow. It was barely wide enough for one of Charlie's boots. He progressed carefully, one foot in front of the other, keeping his left hand on the wall and his right wrapped tightly around the rope. Truth be told, it felt precarious as hell, and he knew it was going to take a miracle to get Harvey across it. But Charlie had crossed half the distance in under a minute; if they could just keep Harvey from fainting himself over the edge, they'd be—

Charlie placed his foot down on what turned out to be a crack in the ledge. He found this out when a foot-long chunk of rock crumbled away, dropping out from under him with no warning. He let out a shout of alarm, overbalancing and toppling over onto the rope; bouncing off it, he lost his footing entirely and slipped off the ledge. And found himself dangling from the rope by his hands, miles of empty space beneath his kicking feet.

"CHARLIE!"

"Fuck, *shit,"* Charlie hissed, struggling to swing his foot back up onto the ledge. For the second time that day, his short legs failed him: he just couldn't reach it. He looked desperately toward the other side, only fifteen or so feet away. Could he just shuffle along the rope until he got there? Or would his shoddy knots give out before he reached it? God, his hands were sweaty, it was so hard to hold on, nobody told you how much it fucking *hurt* to dangle your entire body weight off a rope—

Unexpectedly, he felt a hand grip painfully tight around his wrist, and whipped his head around in shock: there was Harvey, plastered against the wall with a look of blazing determination on his face. "On three," he ordered, in a tone Charlie didn't dare argue with, "swing yourself over here. All right?"

"Okay," Charlie managed, his mouth dry with fear.

“One...two... *three!”*

It was the most terrifying moment of Charlie’s life. He threw his weight backward, gaining momentum like a gymnast, and then swung his body forward as hard as he could. With the hand Harvey was gripping, he released the rope. His feet made contact with the ledge, and he tried to straighten up. There was a sickening, gut-swooping moment when he thought he would pull them both over the edge; but then, Harvey heaved backward with all his might, pulling Charlie upright on the ledge again. They leaned against the wall, Harvey’s fingers still tight on Charlie’s wrist, breathing hard.

“V,” Charlie began, unsure of where to even begin. Harvey shook his head urgently, pointing to the other side. Charlie looked, and felt his stomach drop again; the knot had become unmistakably loose, one end working its way free.

“Let’s get out of here. Go. *Go!”*

They hurried along as quickly as they could while still being careful not to step on any further cracks. Charlie pretended not to notice the slack in the rope, growing looser and looser as they progressed. They were so close: ten feet—five feet—three feet—

The rope came away in Charlie’s hand, falling uselessly from the rock, and his last nerve frayed beyond repair. “JUMP!” he bellowed, seizing Harvey’s hand, and leapt the last three feet. Behind him, Harvey let out a squeak of horror, but followed suit. They landed hard, sprawling and breathless, on the other side of the chasm, Charlie’s feet protruding over the edge. Before he could get to his hands and knees, Harvey stood, seized the top loop of his backpack, and dragged him bodily to safety.

“Holy shit, V,” Charlie panted, rolling onto his back. “You were—”

Harvey took three steps away, put his hands on his knees, and vomited. The nerves he’d kept at bay had, apparently, caught up to him. Charlie got unsteadily to his feet, crossing to him and resting a hand on his back.

“You okay?”

“Lovely,” Harvey replied in a strained voice, “never better.”

The thing about having already encountered Harvey’s greatest fear was that every other floor seemed a lot milder in comparison. Who gave a shit about slimes or serpents? Or even mummies, really? Although several floors later, on what Harvey guessed to be the thirteenth (they’d lost count a little on their river adventure), they ran into a slime the size of an SUV. Even with Harvey and Charlie both beating on it, it took them forever to break it into pieces. Then to break those pieces into smaller pieces. And finally, to smash those pieces into goo. Charlie had begun the fight with long pants, but after the impromptu acid bath he wore something more closely resembling capris. Harvey had fared even worse, since his weapon was so blunt.

“God, I’m exhausted,” Charlie sighed. “What time is it? Can we rest?” It seemed like the best opportunity they were going to get; this floor was just one smallish chamber, with the ladder already visible. As far as Charlie could tell, there was nowhere for any lurking horrors to hide.

“Just after two,” Harvey said, glancing at his watch. “We have ten hours.”

It was a sobering thought. If they were right about being on the thirteenth floor, they’d made it through that many in just under eight hours. Descending another seven or so in ten hours would be tight, and who knew how difficult it would be to find the Shard? But tight or not, they had to take a breather sometime, or they were never going to make it. He made an executive decision, sitting on a patch of goo-free ground and extracting the bag holding their lunch out of his backpack.

“We should make faster progress, fingers crossed,” Harvey was saying, as Charlie munched away at his slightly flattened sandwich. “Since we know more about what we’re dealing with. It may be time to start using some of the bombs for getting through floors faster.”

“How far down do you think we can use them? Without announcing ourselves to the Beast, I mean.”

“I have no idea. I hope it doesn’t have especially good hearing.”

“I feel like final bosses usually have all kinds of inconvenient powers.”

“Final boss, hmm?” Harvey raised an eyebrow at him, smiling. “Is this a video game to you?”

“I tell you what, babe, if it is, they’ve been *super* stingy with the save points.”

As they neared the end of their lunch, they spoke less and less, finally trailing off into silence. Charlie was sure Harvey’s thoughts were along the lines of his own: *what next?* Once upon a time, the idea of not knowing what lay ahead would have been exciting for him. Thrilling, even. But now, the stakes were too high. They had brushed with death a few times already, and Charlie wasn’t eager to keep doing it.

And, man, he was *tired.*

They brushed the crumbs off their laps and stood, hoisting all their various bags back into place. When Charlie had stalled for as long as he could, adjusting straps and checking tools, he turned to Harvey and sighed grimly.

“Ready?”

Charlie owed Abigail an apology. Because it turned out that—in large enough quantities—bats were actually super fucking annoying, if not all that *scary.* The next floor was swarmed with them, and they all seemed to share a single-minded determination to fly directly at Harvey and Charlie’s faces. There were too many of them to make the slingshot a viable

option, so the two of them just swung their weapons wildly overhead, searching for the ladder as best they could. It didn't help that the floor was dark, the torches either burning low or extinguished, and neither of them could spare a hand for a flashlight.

"We should have bought some of those camper things," Charlie shouted to Harvey, twenty feet away. "The lamp things that you wear on your head?"

"Headlamps, you mean?" Harvey called back, and even beneath the strain in his voice, Charlie thought he could make out a laugh.

"OK, smart guy, but did you *bring* any?"

"No."

A sudden burst of light illuminated the corner to Charlie's right, and he turned toward it with short-lived relief. There was another bat flying toward him—not anything unusual, there were hundreds of them—but this one was red...and on *fire.*

"Is that a bat that's on fire?" Harvey shouted.

"A fire bat, you mean?"

"Okay, point taken, but seriously—"

"Yes!"

Charlie knocked it to the ground with the flat of his sword, then stabbed it through with the point. It let out a final shriek, then went still. The fire didn't go out immediately; it smoldered like the embers of a campfire, glowing and smoking slightly.

"They're not any harder to kill, at least," Charlie called, turning. "You doing o—h, shit."

The ceiling had begun to light up. It was almost like seeing a traffic-jammed highway from a distance: a ribbon of light, snaking across the room. Unlike a highway, though, this one was spreading outward. Very quickly. One after another, previously hidden bats burst into flames; then, they dropped from the ceiling. Harvey turned to Charlie, club loose in his hands, with an expression somewhere between disbelief and exasperation.

"Run for it," Charlie urged him. "Come on. The ladder has to be in that alcove, let's go."

They bolted. So many bats had caught fire by now that it was actually *too* bright to see well; Charlie had to peer through slitted eyes as they ran. Harvey had started behind him, but his longer legs quickly caught up. As they rounded the corner, they saw it, bolted to the wall and waiting for them: the ladder.

"There it is!" Charlie shouted, pointing, which was a mistake. A bat swooped down, bouncing off his arm and leaving a scorching welt behind. "Damn it! Ow!"

"Are you okay?"

“Fine, fine, let’s just—”

The first brave bat had apparently inspired the others; they began dive-bombing Charlie and Harvey, raining down like fire and brimstone. Harvey let out a cry of pain, forcing out a strained “go, keep going!” at Charlie’s gasp. It was almost impossible to avoid them now, the air thick with fire. Charlie closed in on the ladder and glanced behind him. Harvey was a few paces away but going strong, and there was no time to argue about who went first. Charlie scaled down the ladder as fast as he could, jumping the final few rungs. As he looked up, the reassuring sight of Harvey’s feet appeared, following him down. He stood back, glancing around to make sure they weren’t about to be swarmed again, and spotted a handful of serpents twenty yards away; he charged them, hacking them to pieces before they could really attack.

“I think that’s it for this floor,” he called, turning back to the ladder.

But then it all went sideways. Harvey had just come fully through the hole, halfway down the ladder, when a single bat flew directly at his face. “Gah!” he cried, and on instinct, his hands came up to slap it away. He slipped off the ladder, plummeting to the floor, and landed with a sickening thud.

“Harvey!” Charlie cried, heart in his throat—but before he could rush to his side, a final serpent came out of the shadows. Charlie grappled with it for a moment before landing a killing blow, and by the time he managed to turn his attention back to Harvey, the doctor was sitting up. He rubbed his forehead balefully, squinting.

“Are you okay?”

“I’m fine,” Harvey called back, “just need a moment to—oh, *fuck* this thing,” he snarled, as the bat flew at him again. Before Charlie could even get close, Harvey raised his club and smacked it out of the air, knocking it to the ground with a pitiful little screech.

Charlie sheathed his sword, grimacing at the burn on his arm. “I’m getting the bat thing now,” he said. “At least when they’re on fire.”

“You’re not kidding.” Harvey straightened his glasses, looking down at the tangle of luggage beside him, and then jumped. “Oh, no, my bag!” he exclaimed, knocking the smoldering corpse of the bat off the pile of canvas. It rolled to a stop a few feet away, leaving a smoking hole in the bag. A small, familiar sound floated across the room: a low hiss, one that Charlie had become all too familiar with that day.

“V,” he asked, ice creeping into his veins, “which bag was that?”

“Oh god,” Harvey blurted, flinging off the strap of the bag and scrambling away as the hissing intensified, “oh my god, the bombs, it was the *bombs—”*

“Harvey, *NO!”* Charlie bellowed, bolting toward him. Harvey had managed to put some distance between himself and the satchel, but Charlie knew it wasn't going to be enough, couldn't possibly be enough. Harvey’s terrified gaze met his for only a nanosecond, one that burned itself into Charlie’s memory forever. The next instant, there was a deafening, world-

rending *BOOM.* It threw Charlie back onto the floor, knocking his ringing head painfully against the stone, and turned the air around him into smoke.

It took Charlie a moment to struggle upright, and another to get his eyes to focus. When at last he had gotten, coughing, to his feet, his stomach dropped into his shoes: the whole cave was fire, and Harvey was simply gone. Where he had been, a hole the size of a truck yawned through the floor. Charlie didn’t stop to think, or to register the flames and chaos raging around him; he simply sprinted for the pit, running harder than he ever had in his life. As he neared the edge, he caught a glimpse of churning water far below, the explosion and resulting rubble making it impossible to tell *how* far.

Without breaking stride, he flung himself over the side.

Chapter End Notes

I'm sorry! Don't hate me! Originally this chapter kept going, but it was SO LONG, I decided to split it up. And believe it or not, this was about the halfway point. I couldn't resist leaving it here, but don't panic. We'll be back with the danger husbands before you know it.

Tomorrow: Charlie works a miracle.

Chapter 35: Fall, Year 3

Chapter Summary

Charlie works a miracle.

Chapter Notes

Thank you all so much for putting up with the cliffhanger yesterday! Let's make up for it right...now.

(Same warnings as yesterday: some violence, some blood, general peril!)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Charlie was a child, he had visited an indoor pool with a high-dive platform, what seemed like a hundred feet above the surface of the water. Goaded by his friends into trying it, he'd taken a deep breath and stepped off the end, his eyes screwed tightly shut. After what seemed like an eternity, he'd opened his eyes, and had been shocked to see the water still many feet away. His breath had left him in a gasp, and he'd hit the water with no oxygen, clawing his way back to the surface in a panic.

This fall reminded him of that one, going on for longer than he could have imagined. The debris raining into the water made it impossible to tell what was below the surface. At last, he plunged through, hitting the frigid water feet-first and feeling the impact reverberate through to the top of his aching head. He shot down like an arrow, kicking his arms and legs out to slow his descent. Booms like distant thunder sounded above him as chunks of stone and wood hit the surface. The trails of bubbles left by superheated debris obscured his vision, making it almost impossible to tell if a human floated somewhere nearby, and his waterlogged backpack threatened to drag him down to the depths. He didn't dare let it go, though; all their remaining supplies were in there, and god only knew what they would need. After what felt like minutes of fruitless searching, he fought back up to the surface.

He heaved in a burning lungful of air the moment his head broke through, his hair plastered into his eyes. "Harvey!" he bellowed, feeling more frantic by the moment. "Harvey!" No answer came, and so as soon as he'd refilled his lungs, he dove back below the surface. Though debris still streaked down through the water, his eyes had adjusted a little, and he thought he could make out a floating dark shape in the near distance. He struck out toward it, cursing the dead weight of the pack. As he kicked past a particularly thick bubble stream, narrowly avoiding the stone that hurtled through the water, the dark shape came into focus and Charlie's stomach gave a great lurch: Harvey.

An involuntary noise of panic escaped him before he could stop it, a thin stream of bubbles issuing from his mouth, and he swam toward Harvey with all of his strength. His husband floated limply in the water, limbs dangling down toward the bottom. It felt like Charlie would never reach him, but at last he made contact, wrapping one arm tightly around his waist. Harvey's eyes were closed, but there was no time to try and revive him; if Charlie stayed under any longer, they'd both drown. He fought with all his strength for some upward progress, kicking with both legs and clawing with his one free arm. But the surface was so far away, Harvey was so heavy, his pack was full of water and was dragging him back down, there were spots in his vision and fire in his lungs—

He broke the surface just as his vision had begun to sparkle, his oxygen totally depleted. His chest heaved as though he'd run a marathon; he couldn't pull in enough air, and he couldn't keep them both afloat, they were going to die if he didn't get them out of the water soon. Harvey's head lolled alarmingly on his shoulders, his glasses long gone and most of his shirt burned away. Now that they were above the water, Charlie could see that he was bleeding, but he couldn't spare the time to find out where the blood was coming from. He had to get Harvey to shore; both of their lives depended on it.

"Fuck," Charlie hissed breathlessly as he kicked toward the shore, "fucking *shit."* He kept up the stream of curses as he swam: he cursed Qi, Skull Cavern, the Wizard, the Dwarf, mummies, Lara Croft and Indiana Jones (who seemed to have been bad influences in his life), Marlon, Gil, himself, and Krobus (who hadn't done anything wrong, but who still fell under the heading of "fucking supernatural shit, fuck all of it").

"When I get you home," he panted to the unconscious Harvey, "we're never going underground again. We're going to build a house on the top of a fucking mountain. We're going to move to the fucking Cloud City on fucking Bespin. We're going to live in a goddamned blimp. It's a good thing you're working on that fear of heights, babe, because I officially have a fear of depths now."

The monologue of rage took his mind off how painful and slow-going his task was, and by the time he reached the end of his tirade, his feet had begun to scrape against sand. With his last bit of strength, he hoisted Harvey over his shoulder and climbed out of the lake, taking five thudding steps before he collapsed to his knees. He caught Harvey's head as it dropped toward the ground, easing him off his shoulder and onto the dry sand. Charlie knelt beside him, glancing around quickly to make sure they weren't about to be mauled by some new kind of horror, but the explosion seemed to have scared away every creature on the floor. Small mercies, he thought, but as he turned his attention back to Harvey, his entire body went cold.

The hand he'd used to lower Harvey's head to the sand was covered in blood.

"What," Charlie gasped, "no, that can't—it's not—"

But it was. The sand beneath Harvey's head was already stained a deep red, darkening as the blood poured out of him. Charlie remembered having read that head wounds bled more than others, though his memory didn't extend to *how to stop it.* He took Harvey's ashen, bloodied face in his hands, shaking him back and forth gently.

“Harvey,” he tried, and the panic spiked as Harvey’s head rolled to one side. “Wake up! *Harvey!”*

He didn’t, and Charlie dropped an ear to his chest, listening. (Something was wrong with his exposed skin, it was mottled and the texture was all wrong, but Charlie wasn’t going to let himself think about what the explosion had done to him just yet.) He wasn't breathing; his chest didn’t rise or fall, and Charlie felt delirious with terror. “No, no, baby, please!” Charlie was seized with a ridiculous impulse to call for help, as though someone would actually appear and save the day for him. But the only person who knew what to do was currently unconscious and losing oxygen on the blood-soaked sand. Why the fuck hadn’t he asked Harvey to teach him first aid? Why had they both just assumed Charlie would be the one in need of medical attention? Charlie racked his brain for something, *anything* that would be useful, and came up with two questionably-true tidbits he was pretty sure he’d learned from movies: dead people didn’t bleed, and someone who wasn’t breathing could still have a pulse. A *pulse,* he had to check, why hadn’t he already checked? His fingers shook so hard he almost couldn’t hold them against Harvey’s neck, and he fought back a choking sob that threatened to escape. *Pull it together, he needs you, he needs—*

“Oh my god, he’s alive, he’s alive,” he babbled uncontrollably, feeling faint with relief: there was a pulse in Harvey’s neck, albeit a slow one. But his relief was short-lived, because what was he going to *do?* He had to stop his bleeding, he had to *start* his breathing, there was no time to get Harvey out of this godforsaken cave, he needed a fucking miracle—

Wait. A miracle: he *had* one, didn’t he?

He dove for his sodden backpack, shaking fingers fumbling against the zipper. Finally managing to wrench the damn thing open, he unceremoniously dumped its contents on the sand, tools and weapons and gallons of lake water, before he found what he was looking for: the Wizard’s little pink bottle, miraculously not broken in all the chaos.

It took him three tries to get the cork out, and even then he nearly dropped the bottle, but at long last he managed to settle Harvey’s head in his lap and tilt the Life Elixir down his throat. *Don’t let it choke him, please, please,* he thought fervently, folding his entire body over Harvey’s head and shoulders. He rocked back and forth, pressing their foreheads together and willing it to work, harder than he’d ever wished for anything in his life. *Please, God, Yoba, whoever’s listening, you can’t take him away from me, please—*

“Guh,” Harvey said, and bucked violently. Charlie shot upright as though he’d been electrocuted, watching with saucer-wide eyes as Harvey rolled to the side and retched up a mouthful of lake water. Charlie reached out and gingerly felt the back of his head; no blood came away on his hand, in fact there was no *wound* there at all. Harvey flopped back onto the sand, his chest heaving, and opened his eyes.

“God,” Charlie cried, wilting with relief. He flung himself across Harvey’s impossibly smooth and unburned chest, cradling his head in his hands and pressing kisses over every inch of his face. Harvey’s hands came up to circle his wrists, and he tucked his face against Charlie’s cheek.

“I’m sorry,” he croaked, and Charlie shook his head, wrapping his arms around Harvey’s shoulders as tightly as he could.

“Not your fault,” he managed thickly, his voice clogged with tears. “Fucking Qi and the fucking Wizard, it’s their fault. Not yours.”

Harvey’s own arms came around Charlie’s back, and the resulting wave of joy left Charlie dizzy. “It’s okay, sunflower,” Harvey whispered, stroking a hand up his spine. “I’m okay.”

The panic had begun to subside, but not entirely—Charlie still felt the adrenaline flooding his system. He pulled back just enough to kiss Harvey, as thoroughly as he dared kiss someone who hadn’t been breathing a minute earlier. He kissed back, and Charlie was surprised at how strong he felt—he didn’t seem to be faint or weak at all, holding himself up without difficulty.

“How do you feel?” he whispered against his mouth, unable to move away. Harvey hummed, breaking away at last to look into his eyes.

“Honestly, completely fine,” he said, sounding as surprised as Charlie felt. “Did you use the Life Elixir? If Rasmodius mass-produced that stuff, he’d put me out of business.”

“I can’t believe it,” Charlie said, sniffling and running fingers over his skin. He really did look fine—no burns, no cuts, no broken bones. Unfortunately, the magic hadn’t fixed his clothes; most of his shirt was burned away, and his pants hung in tatters below the knee. But that didn’t matter. “Can you—okay, I know this is a stupid question, but I don’t know how magic works—did it fix your eyes? Can you see okay?”

Harvey’s gaze slid to the side, focusing experimentally somewhere behind Charlie, and he sighed. “No. I guess my glasses…”

Charlie looked over at the lake. “Yeah.”

“And my medical bag?”

“That, too.”

“Damn.”

“Well.” Charlie hitched an unconvincing smile on his face. “We’ll know what kinds of stuff we need to bring next time. Spare glasses, no bombs.”

“Next time?” Harvey asked, looking puzzled.

“When we try this again,” Charlie elaborated. “Since we can’t finish today.”

“Why can't we finish today?”

Charlie stared at him. “Harvey. You literally *just almost—”* His throat closed up; he couldn’t get the word out. He gestured helplessly from the hole in the ceiling to the lake, trying to get

the point across without saying it. Harvey pushed Charlie's hair back from his forehead, sympathy in his eyes.

"I know, love. But I'm okay now."

"You weren't breathing! You almost drowned!" Charlie felt himself shaking. The adrenaline was spiking in his system again, his fight-or-flight response telling him he had to get Harvey the fuck out of there, *now.* His sodden clothes felt suddenly frigid against his skin; he climbed off Harvey, hunching over his knees. Was this what a panic attack felt like? He couldn't catch his breath, he felt clammy and nauseous. "We can't—it's—"

"Charlie," Harvey said urgently, gripping his wrist. "Yoba, you're cold. I need you to try to calm down, darling, all right? You're in shock. Breathe with me, come on." He took Charlie's hand and pressed it against his own sternum, breathing slowly in, holding it, breathing out. Charlie did his best to follow along; it was just so *hard* for some reason. Harvey was alive and well, the evidence was right there under his hand, but it had all happened so suddenly.

"Picture us somewhere else, somewhere nice. Maybe the blanket under the cherry tree. Close your eyes and just imagine it for a minute, okay? It's night time, the end of summer, not too hot..."

Harvey kept up a stream of low, soothing details, and Charlie did his best to picture them. His shaking fingers still pressed against Harvey's chest; the reassuring warmth of his skin seeped slowly into Charlie's bones. Once or twice, he forgot to breathe deeply, and Harvey gently reminded him. After a small eternity, his trembling began to subside, and the knots in his stomach loosened a little. He opened his eyes, feeling suddenly embarrassed.

"There you are," his husband whispered, giving him a small smile. "Any better?"

"Fuck." Charlie ran a hand over his face, grimacing. "I don't know what came over me."

"You've just been through a major trauma. It's nothing to be ashamed of."

Harvey was too nice. Charlie going to pieces was not helping either of them, but they didn't have time to argue about it. "Listen, V," he began wearily. "We really can't go any further today. Besides all of...what just happened, we don't have any medical supplies, we used up our Life Elixir, you don't have a *weapon."*

"I know you packed a spare club. It's not as good as my other one, but it'll work."

This was true, but Charlie had been hoping Harvey might have forgotten. "You don't even have a shirt!"

"I can borrow your jacket, if you'll let me."

"And—" He hated to mention it, it felt like a low blow, but it was the truth: "You can't see without your glasses."

"I can see well enough," Harvey countered. "Not distances, not clearly at least, but I'm not blind."

“I’m not sure *not blind* is going to cut it in a cave full of monsters.”

“Charlie.” Harvey took his other hand, holding them both and gazing intently at him. “We’ve come so far. We have to be nearly to the twentieth floor by now, and Rasmodius said the Beast is growing stronger every day. We need to finish this, and we *can* finish it.” He squeezed Charlie’s hands, swallowing hard. “Can we just finish it and get back to our life? Our *real* life?”

Charlie wanted to say no. Desperately, *desperately* wanted to say no. But the thought of climbing back up to the surface just to turn around and do it all again *was* exhausting.

He blew out a sigh, his heart sinking. “Okay,” he said at last. Harvey blinked.

“Okay? Really? I thought I’d have to push harder.”

“I promised I’d trust you,” Charlie reminded him. “I said I was going to stop deciding things for your own good. If you think we can do it, I believe you.”

Harvey looked at him, and as much as Charlie was dreading what lay ahead, he couldn’t totally regret anything that put that look on his husband’s face. His eyes shone as though Charlie had said something beautiful and romantic, rather than *let’s keep trudging through a monster-infested tomb.* “Thank you,” he murmured, leaning in to kiss Charlie on the forehead, brief but warm. “We can do this, I know it.”

Clothing trades were made, backup weapons were distributed, and the soggy pile of Charlie’s backpack contents was inventoried. It wasn’t great: they had only a few incredibly basic medical supplies, mostly just bandages and over-the-counter painkillers. What little food they’d had left had been ruined, and both the slingshot and its ammunition were somewhere at the bottom of the lake. And of course, they’d lost all their bombs in the explosion, although Charlie couldn’t find it in himself to be upset about that—he was never going to light another one for as long as he lived, if he had anything to say about it.

Charlie fought a slightly hysterical urge to laugh as Harvey buttoned up his borrowed jacket. It closed just fine around Harvey’s skinny torso, but the sleeves stopped a good five inches above his wrists, and it was nearly short enough to show midriff. He felt a fervent gratitude that Harvey had left his usual green jacket at home; it was the piece of clothing Charlie most associated with his husband, and losing it to the explosion would have been more than he could bear.

Trying not to focus on how vulnerable Harvey looked, with his tiny jacket and no glasses, Charlie hoisted his backpack. “Ready to go?”

“As ready as I’ll ever be.”

The next floor, predictably, *sucked.* They were set upon by serpents and fire bats the moment they had touched ground, although there was one advantage: both of those enemies were *bright,* and Harvey could see them coming. Sadly, they had to fight them all at close range after losing both the slingshot and Harvey’s eye for distance, and that put them in prime scorching territory. This turned the relatively short trek from one ladder to another into a

grueling, painful slog. Still, Charlie thanked his lucky stars that they weren't stuck dealing with mummies, which they no longer had the tools to deal with.

As they descended the ladder, the air clear of serpents and bats, Charlie heard Harvey muttering to himself. "You okay?" he called back up to him.

"Just counting," Harvey replied. "I *think* this might be floor twenty?"

Charlie planted his feet on the ground and straightened, glancing around. It certainly didn't *look* like the lair of a final boss. It just looked like another room: sandstone walls, flickering torches. As Harvey stepped off the ladder behind him, he strained his ears. Maybe the Void Beast would make some kind of recognizable noise? What did despair sound like?

"Um," Harvey said tentatively, "Char?"

"No, come *on,"* Charlie groaned, because while he didn't hear the Void Beast, he did hear something that filled him with despair: mummies. *Lots* of mummies, unless there was a really weird and convincing echo in this place. He craned his neck, taking in as much of the room as he could. There was no ladder in sight, and no suspicious boulders or barrels that could have concealed one, but there *was* a path disappearing behind a bend. And leading directly toward the source of all the noise.

"Well, we don't have much choice," Charlie sighed, raising his sword wearily. "We're gonna have to fight our way through, and get out *fast,* before they can get back up."

"Can't wait," Harvey said, with all the enthusiasm of a root canal patient.

They charged around the bend, hoping the element of surprise might help them gain the upper hand. But Charlie had been right about the number of mummies: the tunnel was packed with them, shoulder-to-shoulder in a mob, and they turned to face Harvey and Charlie en masse. If they'd had visible faces, Charlie was sure they would have worn identical looks of surprise, and it might have been almost comical—instead, it unnerved him to his core.

"All right, assholes, let's wrap this up!" Charlie shouted, charging forward with his sword swinging. He mowed down three mummies with his first stroke, pushing ahead, stepping over their mangled corpses. There was no time to lose, because they couldn't kill them permanently; all they could do was hurry past before the stupid things could repair themselves.

"Was that a *mummy pun?"* Harvey demanded behind him, breathless with exertion.

"Just trying to lighten the mood!"

Hack, slash, stab, jump. The minutes blurred together, Charlie focused on nothing but grasping hands and groaning, yellow-toothed mouths. Somehow, no zombie movie had ever managed to convey the *smell.* It was so thick in the narrow tunnel, it felt as though it permeated his entire body; he could feel it settling into his pores, soaking into his damp hair. He stopped being fazed by the crunch of desiccated limbs under his feet, by the chaos of groans surrounding him, but he never got used to that horrible smell. At one point, he turned

his head to check on Harvey, and wished he hadn't: the mummies behind them had gotten back to their feet, and they were officially closed in.

"Who the fuck even *were* these people?" Charlie snapped, bringing his sword down into the skull of another mummy. Its fingers raked his arm on the way down, leaving a swath of angry scratches across already-burned skin. "Gah! Damn it! Why are there so *many* of them?"

"Gunther would probably know," Harvey panted, his voice strained. "Are we near the end? I'm not sure how much longer I can keep this up!"

"I think—maybe—" Charlie couldn't spare much attention for the distance, occupied with the mummies trying to murder him a few feet away, but it seemed like maybe the horde was thinning? And were the walls starting to widen out again? Maybe they were going to make it, maybe it was—

Harvey let out a wordless shout of fright behind him, and Charlie spun around to a sight out of his nightmares: Harvey had tripped over a disembodied leg, fallen, and the reanimated mummies had begun to swarm him. Already one had a grip on his ankle, and more were coming, even the limbs on the ground inching toward him. Charlie's vision went nearly red with rage, and he rushed the corpses attacking his husband.

"Get—your—fucking—hands—off—him!" he snarled, slashing harder and faster than he ever had in his life. Terror rushed through his bloodstream, wiping away the exhaustion that had begun to creep up on him. He took the head and shoulders off the one clutching Harvey's ankle, repulsed to see that it kept its grip even when its arm dangled in thin air. He seized its wrist, prying it away from Harvey's skin, and flung it as hard into the mob as he could. The next moment, he hauled Harvey back to his feet, looking him over urgently.

"Are you okay, V?"

"Fine—I'm sorry, I just— *shit!"* he cried, striking out with the club as another mummy got too close. "I can't really see them, they're the same color as the walls, I'm sorry!"

"It's fine, it's fine, let's just get out of here!"

Charlie couldn't believe they made it—swinging their weapons with increasing desperation and dwindling finesse, terrified and winded—but somehow they did, bursting through the final dregs of the mummy phalanx into a wide circular chamber. A ladder led downward on the opposite wall, and Charlie didn't spare a single moment to consider it: he dragged Harvey after him, all but flinging him down through the hole. They scrambled down the rungs, tripping over each other, finally landing hard on the packed ground at the bottom. Harvey lay panting for a moment, but Charlie jumped to his feet, swinging his sword in a wild circle. He felt shaky and panicked, sure they were about to be attacked again. But nothing emerged from the shadows.

Not even the Void Beast.

"Where is it?" Charlie demanded, nearly shouting. "Come on! We have to be past floor twenty now! Where the hell is the thing?!"

“Char, it’s okay,” Harvey tried, his eyes wide and frightened as he reached for him, but Charlie had reached the end of his rope.

“It’s not okay! They said twenty floors, that’s what we signed up for!” He stalked across the room, pacing, searching furiously for something he already knew was not there. “How much more of this are we supposed to deal with, huh? Is it even *down here?”*

He startled violently as arms went around him, but it was just Harvey; Charlie let his sword clatter to the floor, feeling worn-out and miserable and generally like an asshole. He turned into his husband’s embrace, burying his face in his shoulder and fisting both hands in the back of his too-small jacket.

“Fuck,” he mumbled, muffled into the fabric. “I’m sorry. I’m being such a dick.”

“You’re not,” Harvey countered, one hand carding through Charlie’s hair. His tall, solid form grounded Charlie a little, but he couldn’t shake the worst of the chill, couldn’t seem to center himself again. He felt jittery, raw, as though all his nerves were exposed. “We’ve been through so much, and it’s not like I was any help back there—”

“It’s not your fault.”

“We’ll have to agree to disagree, because we don’t have time to argue about that right now. But how do you feel?”

Charlie sighed. “Terrible,” he admitted. “I’m so tired. And scared. And...sad, kind of.”

“Kind of,” Harvey ventured, “like you did in the western cornfield?”

Charlie tilted his face up to look at him, considering this. It wasn’t anything like that, really. That had been debilitating, gut-wrenching, unbearable. This was just... *bad.* But if he dug deep, he could kind of see how they were related, the little sprouts of despair that could eventually grow into the way he’d felt out there on the western edge of the farm. He blinked at Harvey, nodding.

“I feel it too,” Harvey said. “I think that means we’re close.”

“It seems weird to say this, but I hope so.”

They *had* been close, it turned out. Three more floors passed relatively uneventfully, with just a handful of serpents and a smattering of mummies to contend with. Finding the ladders took longer than clearing out the baddies, really. And then they descended another ladder, and the moment Charlie’s foot touched the floor, he felt it: a horrible, breath-stealing chill; a stab of grief so intense it nearly doubled him over. He looked at Harvey, whose face had gone pale, his eyebrows drawn together. Clearly, he was feeling the same thing.

“I think this is it,” Charlie whispered. They stood in a small antechamber, barely larger than a broom closet. A ragged gap in the rock wall opened up to a much larger room. Harvey leaned to the side and peered through the doorway, then sighed in frustration.

“Old habits,” he muttered. “Can you see anything?”

Charlie traded places with him, taking care to stay out of sight of whatever lurked inside. “I don’t see much,” he whispered back. “A lot of rubble, what looks like an old fountain. It must be a big room; it’s too dark to make out much of anything beyond that.”

“No monsters?”

“Not that I can see.”

They drew back, huddling together beside the doorway. Charlie was torn between a fierce desire to go storming in and find the damn thing, versus an equally gripping dread. This was the make-or-break moment: they were either going to succeed and go home, leaving it all behind them forever, or they were going to get themselves killed.

But he was so, so tired. One way or another, it was time to end it.

His hands found Harvey’s, gripping tight. “I need you to listen to me,” he said, keeping his voice down and leaning close so Harvey could see his expression. “We’re going in there together, and we’re going to find the thing. But if something goes wrong, we’re going to run for the stairs, okay? If *either* of us decides it’s over, we’re both out. No time for arguments. Deal?”

Harvey nodded, his mouth set in a thin, determined line. He stepped closer, his body flush with Charlie’s, and cupped his jaw; Charlie turned his face into the touch, savoring this last moment of peace. “It’s going to be all right,” Harvey murmured, his thumb stroking over Charlie’s cheekbone. “I have faith.”

“You picked a hell of a time to start actually believing in Yoba,” Charlie said, huffing a mirthless laugh.

“Not in Yoba,” Harvey countered, tilting Charlie’s chin up. “I believe in *you.”*

There was nothing to say to that, not without letting the lump in his throat overwhelm him, so Charlie just kissed him. They clung to each other, mouths moving together as they had thousands of times before, and Charlie tried hard to believe it: that this wouldn’t be the last time, that they would go home to their own bed tonight, that they would wake up tomorrow to a brighter and safer world. When they broke apart, he kept his grip on Harvey’s hand, sighing.

“Stay close to me,” he whispered.

“I’m right behind you.”

The first steps into the main chamber were terrifying. Charlie was sure they would be set upon the moment they crossed through the doorway, but nothing immediately happened. They crept along the wall, heading for the nearest pile of rubble, fingers still intertwined. Whatever this room was now, it had apparently been impressive once: the piles Charlie had seen from the doorway were crumbled columns, their elaborately carved stumps still

protruding from the floor like stalagmites. And there were a *lot* of them—if they had to search under every one of these piles, they were going to be looking for a long, long time. He thought with a bizarre longing of his last visit to the Pelican Town mine, of the spell that had pointed him toward the goal, as clearly as a compass. Something like that would be awfully handy here, he reflected.

By unspoken agreement, they kept close to the wall they'd entered through. Charlie was loath to go near the looming darkness at the back of the room before he had to. And although the fountain seemed to hold some significance, checking it out would have meant walking into the middle of the chamber—vulnerable, uncovered, and obvious. They sifted through the piles of debris, gritting their teeth at every sound they made, holding their breath whenever a chunk clattered more than they'd expected. Charlie almost wished they could see the Beast, so at least they would know which direction to keep an eye on.

He *also* wished they had some idea what the Shard looked like. Qi and Rasmodius had been adamant that they'd know it when they saw it, and "prismatic" made Charlie think it was something glassy and colorful, but how big was it? Would it fill his backpack, or could they potentially miss it under a chunk of pillar? Rasmodius had acted like these questions were beneath him, which made Charlie think he'd never actually seen one, either.

After almost twenty minutes of fruitless searching in near-silence, Charlie had to admit defeat: they were going to have to progress further into the chamber, either into the suffocating darkness past the pillars, or to the fountain in the center. The fountain's prominence definitely made it look like a trap, but the annoying thing about traps, Charlie reflected, was that they were usually baited with something. And so, he squared his shoulders, gestured to Harvey, and set off across the room on tiptoe.

The fountain was a crumbling wreck, but had obviously been stately once upon a time. The lower basin was large enough for both Charlie and Harvey to take a bath in, and the upper basin stood well above either of their heads. For some reason, the lower basin was half-full of what looked like sand. Harvey perched on the edge and began sifting through it with his fingers; Charlie, weighing his options, climbed onto the rim. He gripped the edge of the upper basin, wished he had tried harder at the chin-up tests in high school, and hoisted himself inelegantly over the side.

He only managed to get his upper half over the edge, but it was enough: there, lying in the basin like a tossed coin, was what had to be the Prismatic Shard. Slightly larger than his fist, jagged and sharp-looking, each of its crystalline facets seemed to reflect a different color. It was such an obviously magical object that even the Charlie of three years ago, who hadn't believed in magic at all, would have recognized it as such. He felt a relief so profound, so all-consuming, he almost forgot to keep his voice down. Closing his fingers around it—it was warm, as though a chicken had been roosting on it—he carefully shimmied backward, easing his toes back down onto the rim of the lower basin. As he straightened, he looked at it more closely, turning it in the torchlight. The facets threw a million colorful points of lights over the walls, the ceiling, Charlie himself.

"V," he whispered, nudging Harvey's elbow with his foot. Harvey looked up at him, a fistful of sand slipping through his fingers, and squinted. Then his jaw dropped.

“Charlie—is that—”

“This is it. It has to be.”

“Can I see?”

Charlie placed it into Harvey’s hands, watching the disco-ball reflections play across his delighted face. “I can’t believe it,” Harvey whispered reverently, bringing it close to his face. “We can get out of here, sunflower, we can go home!”

“Let’s do that,” Charlie agreed, swinging his backpack around in front of him. He unzipped it, rummaging around inside for something to wrap the Shard in. “Right now. I don’t want to spend another second down h—*AHH!”*

Charlie had looked up, his attention drawn by a white circle that had appeared over Harvey’s shoulder. For a split-second, he had the thought that a doorway or window had opened, some kind of portal through the suffocating darkness at the back of the room. (It seemed like the kind of thing that would happen in a video game—when you finished a dungeon in *Blood Magic,* you didn’t have to walk all the way back to the beginning, after all.) But before he could even really finish the thought, a second had appeared, eight feet away from the first.

And then, below that, the teeth.

Chapter End Notes

Dun dun dunnnn.

Thanks so much for all your lovely comments yesterday! I was actually really nervous to post such a cruel cliffhanger, but you were all so nice about it :D I just have to put our poor boys through the wringer a liiiiiiittle bit more, I hope you'll forgive me!

Tomorrow: Charlie feels out of place. Harvey races the clock. The Beast has tricks in store for them both.

Chapter 36: Fall, Year 3

Chapter Summary

Charlie feels out of place. Harvey races the clock. The Beast has tricks in store for them both.

Chapter Notes

Danger Husbands, part 3! I hope you're enjoying our little Skull Cavern adventure. We're getting close to the end of it now!

Warnings for this chapter—some are the same as the last few: violence, blood, general peril. Also, some discussions of depression, and someone considering some not-great sexual decisions (as always, I promise NO non-con or anything like it, nothing really bad!). If this seems like a confusing set of warnings for a chapter set in a cave dungeon, that is completely understandable. But hopefully it'll all make sense in ~6k words :) See you in the end notes!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Charlie didn't remember giving his body a conscious instruction to move. One moment he was standing on the edge of the fountain's lower basin, glancing over Harvey's shoulder; the next, he had drawn his sword, leapt down to the ground, and shoved Harvey behind him. His poor husband stumbled, clapping a hand over his squawk of surprise.

"Char, what is it?" he hissed, gripping Charlie's arm. "What's happening, I can't—"

"WELL," bellowed that mouthful of teeth, in a thundering roar that shook Charlie's bones inside his body. Harvey let out a choked-off sound of terror, his fingers clenching painfully around Charlie's bicep. *"I WAS NOT EXPECTING VISITORS."*

Charlie was a fucking idiot. The back of the room wasn't *dark,* it was *full*—the Void Beast had occupied all the available space, curled up and sleeping. As it unfurled its body, Charlie turned, grabbing Harvey by the hand.

"Go. *Go!"*

They ran for the door, Charlie half-dragging Harvey along after him. The terrain was uneven, studded with debris, and it was hard enough for Charlie to keep his footing with good eyesight; Harvey staggered along after him, slipping and sliding on chunks of pillar. It was

going to be close, but they might make it—Charlie could see the stairs on the other side of the doorway—

An enormous black foot slammed down in front of them, close enough that Charlie couldn't halt his momentum and ran into it. He thudded to the ground, taking Harvey down with him. Following the leg attached to the foot with his horrified gaze, he turned, feeling his stomach drop into his shoes.

The Beast towered above them, at least twenty feet tall, its knobby spine curving against the ceiling. It was shaped more or less like Krobus, if Krobus had walked on four legs and emerged straight from Charlie's nightmares. Each of its claws was nearly as long as Charlie's entire body, and its gleaming teeth dripped with saliva. Its fur was so black, it seemed to suck all the light out of the air around it; Charlie couldn't make out a single shape within its shifting depths. Its eyes glowed blank and white, narrowed above its grinning maw. At last it spoke again.

"HUMANS," it bellowed, blowing Charlie's hair back from his face in a wave of burning air, and behind him Harvey moaned what sounded like a prayer. *"I MUST ADMIT, I AM IMPRESSED. YOU HAVE DONE WELL TO REACH THIS PLACE."*

Charlie fought viciously against the animal in him, the frightened creature shrieking *holy shit that thing is huge we're gonna die,* and got to his feet. Behind him, he heard Harvey start to do the same. "Um," Charlie said, "thanks?"

"I AM TIRED, AND THERE IS NO NEED FOR MORE DEATH. GIVE ME THE OBJECT, AND YOU WILL WALK FREE."

Charlie was a fucking idiot, maybe, but he hadn't been born yesterday. It took every bit of willpower he had, but he tightened his fingers on the shard, letting the pain of its sharp edges ground him. "And then what?" he shouted back, balling his free hand into a fist. "You destroy the Valley and thousands of other people die?"

"YOU MAY LEAVE THIS LAND. SETTLE ELSEWHERE. THEIR FATE DOES NOT CONCERN ME, AND IT NEED NOT CONCERN YOU."

"It fucking does concern me!" he raged. "We're not going anywhere. This is our *home."* As terrified as he was, it was the truth: he had never belonged anywhere the way he did in Stardew Valley. It was where he had reinvented himself, where he had met Harvey and built a life with him, where his friends lived, where they were going to raise their children. And he would be *damned* if some fantasy-novel monster was going to take it away from him.

The Beast regarded him for a moment, and even though it had no pupils, Charlie had the oddest feeling that it was focusing on him—or *in* him, maybe. He felt exposed, scrutinized, and wished he had somewhere to hide. *"YOU ARE IN LEAGUE WITH THE WIZARD AND THE COLLECTOR,"* it said at last, in an unmistakably derisive tone. *"I WONDER. DO YOU UNDERSTAND THEIR MOTIVES? WHY DO THEY DESIRE THE OBJECT?"*

Charlie *had* wondered this, right from the beginning, when he'd been convinced Qi wanted to hunt them. *Philanthropy,* Qi had claimed, and certainly both of them would be affected if the

Valley fell under its spell, but was that really it? He still wasn't a hundred percent certain, but he knew one thing for sure: Qi and the Wizard seemed a hell of a lot less evil than *this* thing. "They're protecting the Valley, like us—"

A horrible noise issued from the Beast's mouth, and it took Charlie a moment to realize it was laughing. *"SUCH A GULLIBLE CREATURE,"* it snorted. *"THEY LIE TO YOU. THEY DO NOT DESERVE YOUR TRUST, OR YOUR ASSISTANCE."*

Charlie felt a vicious spike of doubt, like a bucket of cold water. *Were* they being lied to? Had they done all this as some kind of fetch quest, just to give Qi another shiny object for his collection? Or was the Wizard trying to bolster his own power? Maybe the Beast was right, maybe it was—

Oh. Right. Maybe it was fucking with his emotions, like it had been for weeks.

Also, could it read his mind? Great.

"THEY HAVE USED YOU FOR THEIR OWN ENDS BEFORE—"

"You're right," Charlie interrupted loudly, "they have. But *them* being assholes doesn't make *you* not evil."

"Maybe don't antagonize it?" Harvey whispered, a hand on his arm.

"EVIL?" the Beast repeated, its eyes comically wide, as though Charlie had mortally offended it. *"SUCH HARSH WORDS. WHY EVIL? I MUST EAT, LIKE YOU. I MUST GROW MY FOOD, LIKE YOU. IS IT AN ACT OF EVIL WHEN YOU HARVEST YOUR CORN?"*

"Corn doesn't have feelings!"

"AS IF YOU WOULD KNOW. AS IF YOU WOULD CARE."

Charlie actually *would* care, and so he was grateful not to know—it would be hard to make it as a farmer who couldn't bring himself to harvest anything. He felt a mounting desperation as their talk wore on. The Beast's front foot was still between them and the door, and it had moved with a speed Charlie hadn't anticipated for its size. How were they going to get out of this? He doubted they could beat it in a head-on fight; could he trick it somehow? But it seemed like it could read his mind, so how was he ever going to get the upper hand?

Before he could form a plan, the Beast seemed to lose patience. *"THIS IS NOT A NEGOTIATION, HUMAN,"* it said, almost a sigh. *"I WILL HAVE THE OBJECT."*

A calm came over Charlie that he'd only felt once or twice before, the time he'd punched Philip in the town square, the time he'd gotten ready to finish off that Shadow Brute. It seemed to be his body's way of saying *you got this.* He gripped the shard in one hand; in the same movement, he lifted his sword, and held it out in front of him. "Then you're going to have to take it off my corpse," he declared, spreading his feet into a fighting stance.

"Charlie," Harvey begged behind him, "don't—"

“THAT IS ACCEPTABLE,” roared the beast, and reared up on its hind legs, its head against the ceiling. Charlie knew, with a certainty down to his bones, that he couldn’t dodge it or block it, but it had made one mistake—it had pulled its foot away from the door. So he did the only thing he had time to do: he whirled around, met Harvey’s terrified gaze, and gripped him by the jacket.

“Charlie, what are you—”

“Run, V,” he whispered, and shoved him away with all his strength.

Harvey stumbled and fell, the beast’s blazing maw descended around him, and the last thing Charlie heard was Harvey’s cry of *“NO!”* before the world went black.

* * * * *

“Charlie. *Charlie.”*

“Whuh?” Charlie sat up straight, his chin coming up off his hand. He’d apparently been dozing off at his desk; Anton, the head of his sales team, stood over him, looking amused.

“Slow day?”

“I’m sorry,” Charlie said, still struggling to get his bearings. He had the frustrating sensation of being interrupted during a really good dream, but what had it been? He couldn’t remember any of the details. He shook himself, filing it away in the back of his mind. “I was miles away, I guess. What’s up?”

“Boss wants to see you. She told me to come grab you.”

“Oh, shit.”

“Nah, I think you’re OK. I won’t tell her you were sleeping on the job,” Anton added with a wink, and Charlie smiled gratefully as he got to his feet.

“You’re the best.”

On the short walk through Joja’s halls, Charlie tried his best to clear the distraction from his mind. Why did he feel so wrong-footed? Shamefully, it wasn't the first time he’d fallen asleep at his desk, and he’d never woken up feeling like this. His head ached a little; maybe he was getting sick. When he arrived at the door bearing the plaque VP OF SALES, he knocked and received a muffled, “Come in!”

Charlie had braced himself for a lecture about his lackluster performance—he knew he was miles behind his coworkers in their goals for the quarter—but when he stepped through the door, Elise gave him a sunny smile. “Charlie, hi, have a seat,” she said, gesturing at the chair in front of her desk. He had always hated this office; the huge desk and bright decor had always made him feel as though he’d been summoned by his grade-school principal.

“Anton said you wanted to see me?” he ventured, trying to look more comfortable than he felt.

“I did. I know we’re all busy today, so I’ll get right to the point.” She leaned forward, propping her elbows on the desk and lacing her fingers together. “It’s come to my attention that we might not be using your talents effectively.”

Charlie almost assumed she was being sarcastic, since no one—least of all Charlie—believed he had any talent for sales at all, but her face and tone seemed totally sincere. “Um,” he said, not sure how to respond to this. Fortunately, Elise barreled on without him.

“I’m sure you’ve heard the rumors about the new corporate account. We’d like you to head the team handling that account. Starting tomorrow, we’re promoting you to project manager. You’ll receive a twenty percent raise and your own office. Not a corner or anything, but it’ll have walls.” She smiled at him, and Charlie tried desperately to arrange his face into something happy, or grateful, or anything other than totally bewildered.

“Wow, Elise, that’s, um...that’s really great, thank you.” She kept looking at him in that benevolent way, and he finally managed to add, “Can I ask what made you think I was right for this position? Just curious, I’m not trying to...uh…”

“Well, we felt that you really embodied the qualities we were hoping for in a project manager. You’ll be more challenged in a role like this; you’re wasted on sales calls. Take some time tonight to think about who you’d like on your team.” Elise stood, extending her hand for a shake. “Congratulations, Charlie. You’ve got a bright future with Joja Corporation.”

After he left Elise’s office, and after a smiling intern had helped him box up his few possessions and move them into an office (a kind of shitty interior office with no windows, but he supposed it beat the cubicle), Charlie spent a good half hour just staring at the wall. What the fuck had just happened? He *wasn’t* a particularly good employee. He wasn’t awful, sure, but he really was a mediocre salesman, and he didn’t have half the enthusiasm for the work that Felicia or Amir or Max from his floor had. *He* knew he’d been more or less spinning his wheels, and he’d been under the impression that everyone else had known that, too.

He wondered why he didn’t feel happier. A five-figure raise, a new office, a team? Wasn’t this exactly the kind of thing he’d gone to school for? But instead of pride or excitement, he mostly felt resignation, as though he’d reached an expected stop on a train journey he didn’t especially want to be taking.

Oh, well. Maybe he could snap himself out of it. He’d call his mom and tell her, text his friends and tell them. They’d go out for celebratory drinks, toast to his “bright future,” figure out something frivolous to spend his newly increased salary on. Whatever funk he was in, he was sure it wouldn’t last long.

He only wished he could remember what he’d been dreaming about.

* * * * *

Harvey had to be hallucinating.

He *had* to be, because the only other option was that a monster had literally just eaten Charlie, and that was too far into the realm of nightmares for even Harvey's anxiety-riddled brain to believe. He could barely see, the world rendering in smudges and blurs, but he could still make out the enormous black bulk of the Void Beast looming over him. In his delirious state, he almost forgot to be afraid of it.

"Did you just—*eat* my husband?!" he bellowed, pushing himself unsteadily to his feet. Far above, he saw the white smudges of the Beast's eyes blink.

"IS THAT WHAT THAT HUMAN WAS?"

"Yes!"

"NO."

It was a mark of how poorly Harvey's day was going that he felt some actual relief at this, in spite of having watched it happen.

"I MERELY SWALLOWED IT," the Beast added.

"What the—that's the same thing!" He was *not* going to get into a semantic argument with a monster, he *wasn't.* The Beast shook itself, and Harvey remembered his fear a little bit. Yoba, it was big.

"IT IS NOT. I DO NOT POSSESS A STOMACH. IT HAS BEEN SENT TO THE VOID."

"To *where?"*

"THE VOID," the Beast growled impatiently. *"MY HOMELAND. IT WILL DIE THERE, AND I WILL RETAIN THE OBJECT."*

Harvey had been frantically performing the tricky mental math of how long Charlie spent without oxygen vs. how much brain damage he would incur, but at this he abandoned it, because you didn't have to be a fucking doctor to know that *that* wasn't OK. "That's not going to work for me!" he shouted back, and to his tiny, impotent rage, the Beast let out what was unmistakably a laugh.

"SO DEMANDING," it roared, and its face loomed a little closer, as though it were crouching. *"YOUR COURAGE IS ADMIRABLE."*

"I'm serious," Harvey warned, in as threatening a tone as he could muster while shaking from head to toe. "Give him back, *right now!"*

"OR YOU WILL DO...WHAT," the creature retorted, and even with his terrible vision Harvey could make out its huge, blinding-white grin. It was *laughing at him,* it thought this was *funny,* and all at once, Harvey snapped. Without even fully realizing he was going to do it, he leapt forward and struck out with the club, as hard as he possibly could. It made contact with that gleaming grin, the force of it sending shockwaves up his arms, and he heard the distinct sound of something shattering to the floor.

There was a beat of deathly silence. Harvey could hear the pounding of his own heart in his ears, but curiously, he was no longer really afraid of the Beast. Oh, sure, there was still some animal terror deep in his lizard brain, but up front there was only room for one fear: losing Charlie. The idea was so unthinkable, even this storybook monster paled in comparison. He held the club as though waiting for a pitch, squinting fruitlessly at the mass before him. Slowly, very slowly, the corners of the white maw turned downward.

"YOU WILL REGRET THAT," the Beast pronounced gravely, and as it lunged, he struck out again.

* * * * *

"I'm just so proud," Charlie's mother gushed, for the fifth time.

"Thanks, Mom." Charlie pushed his salad around, hitching a smile onto his face. The restaurant had been his suggestion, but for some reason he wasn't hungry anymore. His appetite seemed like that these days: flighty, unpredictable, deserting him at inopportune moments. Maybe he was getting sick? He hoped not; it would look pretty bad to start calling in sick two weeks into his new job.

"Eat up, honey, you look so tired. Are they working you too hard?"

"No, no," he insisted, waving his fork dismissively. "It's just that time of year, I think. I might be getting a little bug or something. No big deal." He *wished* they were working him harder, honestly. If anything, he felt even less needed in his new job than in his previous one. His team was competent, motivated, and reliable; he spent an increasing amount of time playing Sudoku on his work computer.

"Well, make sure you get enough rest. Marjorie says her office is always full of twenty-somethings who work too much and wear themselves down."

"Mm."

"Speaking of Marjorie," she added slyly, and her change in tone made Charlie glance up from his food, "her son Isaac is back in town. Just finished his MBA in the Capitol, at Ferngill U. I have to say, he's very good-looking."

Charlie's stomach dropped, making him even less hungry. "I can find my own dates," he protested weakly. It wasn't the first time she'd tried to set him up with someone, and even under the best of circumstances, it had never gone well. And Charlie's current circumstances were far from the best.

"You haven't even let me tell you about him, sweetie. Marjorie says he loves books, just like you. Lots to talk about, hmm?"

He sighed, his patience wearing thin. "Mom. Listen. It's not a good time, okay? I need to just focus on work for a while. Seriously."

“Well,” she said, “all right,” with a tone and an eyebrow raise that suggested they were nowhere near done with the conversation in the long run. *Just change the subject,* he pleaded silently. *Anything else, anything at all.*

“So tell me. What’s your favorite part of your new job?”

Well, shit.

* * * * *

“Misha,” Charlie ventured, as they stood waiting for their Americanos in the corner of the coffee shop, “have you ever felt...just, kind of...messed up? For a long time?”

“You mean like depressed?”

“I guess so.”

“People don’t get depressed in my family,” Misha mused. “You’re sad, you better have a reason, or my mom is going to lecture you about growing up in the Depression for five hours.”

“Yeah, okay, but.”

“Everyone feels like shit in their late twenties, Charlie. You need to get laid, or maybe drunk.” He eyed Charlie critically. “Or, I mean, talk to somebody.”

“Isn’t that what I’m doing?”

“Like a *professional,* man. With that manager money of yours.”

Charlie sighed. *That,* at least, was probably sound advice, but he’d kind of hoped it wasn’t to that point yet. What was he going to tell a therapist? *I woke up one day feeling like somebody died, even though nobody has? I keep feeling like I should be somewhere else? Everything is going great for me, and I’m more miserable than I’ve ever been?* “Yeah,” he said heavily, scrubbing a hand through his hair. “Do you know of anyone who—”

“Misha! Hi!”

They both turned to see a stranger walking in: a tall, dark-haired man with a wide smile. “Eric, hey! How you been?” Misha hugged the stranger, then gestured to Charlie. “This is my friend Charlie from work. Charlie, Eric.”

“Hey, Eric. Nice to meet you.”

The two of them caught up for a minute, while Charlie got his coffee and mostly zoned out for a while. There was a vase of sunflowers on the counter, and something about sunflowers always bummed him out. Of course, he was bummed most of the time lately. He wondered if he should take some time off from work, then wondered what he would even do with himself if he did. The weekends were bad enough; he found himself mostly haunting his apartment, drinking a bit too much and eating a bit too little.

"...you're welcome too, of course," Eric was saying, and Charlie realized the man was speaking to *him.* He did his best to look attentive, glancing desperately at Misha and hoping he got the memo.

Misha did take pity on him. "It's that club on Fifth. Sara keeps talking about it, I know you've heard of it." To Eric, he added, "What time?"

"Ten, ten-thirty? I'll text you."

"Sounds good. We'll both be there."

Charlie snapped back to attention with a jolt—had he just been volunteered to go to something?—and then realized how Eric was looking at him: warm, lingering, a tiny smile around the corners of his mouth. Oh. He was interested, maybe. Was Charlie?

...Nope. It was like the salad all over again: nice, but Charlie had no appetite.

Eric said his goodbyes, and almost before the door had closed, Charlie turned to Misha. "We'll *both* be there? I'm not going."

"Yes, you are."

"Come on, Misha. I told you…" He trailed off, his face burning, and tried again. "I'm not feeling it, okay?"

Misha rolled his eyes, taking a sip of his coffee as he headed for the door. "That's why you have to come. I'm not letting you mope around by yourself on a Friday night. You need to get out and *do* something."

"Seriously—"

"Seriously, chin the fuck up and be ready at ten. I'm picking you up, and I'm literally not taking no for an answer, so shut up and drink your coffee."

He shut up and drank his coffee. Who knew, it could be...kind of fun? Maybe?

* * * * *

Charlie wanted to go home.

He'd been at the club for less than an hour, but for some reason it was grating on his every last nerve. The lights were too bright, the music too loud, the people too drunk. He knew his friends had meant well in bringing him here, but whatever was wrong with him these days, it wasn't improving just because he'd dragged himself out of his apartment. Desperate for something to do, he'd taken up a post near the bar, waiting impatiently to order another drink he didn't especially want. Sara, Misha and Jordan stood in a cluster toward the other end of the bar, laughing with that guy they'd run into earlier—what was his name again? Eric? As Charlie watched them, he caught maybe-Eric's eye; the man winked at him and grinned, and Charlie glanced away uncomfortably. For the hundredth time in the last month, he wondered what was wrong with him. Once upon a time, a look like that would have been the first step

in a very short journey back to his apartment and into a guy's pants. But tonight, the prospect sounded kind of exhausting.

"Hey," said a voice, very close, and Charlie looked up to find Eric standing directly in front of him. He smiled, warm and slow, exactly the kind of smile Charlie had always liked. "We didn't get to talk that much earlier. I was hoping to get to know you a little better."

Charlie swirled the dregs of his last drink at the bottom of his glass, wishing he'd been able to order his refill. Maybe being drunk would help. "There's not that much to know," he said lightly, striving for a tone of *uninterested, but not rude.* "Just another Joja drone, you know how it is."

Eric seemed totally undeterred by this, leaning in close under the pretext of sliding his drink onto the bar. "In that case," he murmured, his lips close to Charlie's ear, "how about we forget the talk and go dance?"

Charlie didn't want to dance. He wanted to leave, alone. But he caught Sara's eye over Eric's shoulder, and she made an encouraging gesture at him—*go on, go get him!*—and he knew, if he didn't dance with somebody at least once, she was going to give him shit about it for days. And he was just so *tired* of everybody demanding to know what his problem was.

Charlie didn't want to dance. But he didn't have a good reason not to.

"Okay," he said at last, and allowed Eric to twine their fingers together and tow him out onto the dance floor. Charlie didn't know the song, but it sounded pretty much like everything else they'd heard that night, repetitive thumping bass drowning out all thought. As soon as they made it to a free spot, Eric moved in close, setting his hands on Charlie's waist and moving their hips together.

That same sense of unease, of wrongness, roiled in his gut. *I shouldn't be here, I shouldn't be doing this,* he thought, but why not? He'd never felt any guilt or hesitation about his hookups before. Eric was, objectively, hot, and he was obviously interested in Charlie. But the brush of their bodies together, Eric orbiting closer and closer with every measure of the music, made him nervous in all the wrong ways. Three songs in, he searched Eric's face, hoping to find answers there. Was it *him?* Was there something subconsciously off-putting about him? He really didn't think so; whatever it was, that wrongness, it was coming from inside Charlie.

Unfortunately, Eric mistook his long stare as an invitation, and leaned in to press their lips together. Charlie's unease spiked into something like panic, his heart pounding. He jerked backward on instinct, his hands on Eric's shoulders. And oh, great, now Eric was looking at him like he was a total freakshow, and why had he panicked like that?

"I'm sorry," he blurted, racking his brains for an excuse. "Sorry. I just, um...it's...been a while?" It hadn't, particularly, but it was the first thing that had come to mind. Fortunately, Eric's bewildered expression turned into one of sympathy, and he backed up a little.

"Oh, I get it," he assured Charlie. "After my last breakup it was hard for me to get back out there, too. Were you together long?"

“Yeah,” Charlie lied. It was time to get the fuck out of this conversation before Eric started pressing him for details on his imaginary relationship. He gestured to the bar, a little wildly. Alcohol always helped. “Um, can I buy you a drink?”

“I’d love that.”

The drinking seemed like a great idea, for a while. Three or four shots in, Charlie stopped worrying quite so much, though Eric’s handsome proximity still wasn’t doing it for him the way it normally would have. The man leaned half against the bar, half against Charlie, laughing raucously at whatever Charlie had just said. Had it been funny? He genuinely couldn’t remember. He was doing his best to hold up his end of the conversation, but he knew he wasn’t doing well; fortunately, Eric seemed more than willing to fill in the blanks. God, he wished he was wasted. Should he just get wasted? He started to lift his hand to signal for another round, but Eric caught it in the air, leaning in to brush his lips against Charlie’s jaw.

“I don’t want to push you,” he purred, “really, but...I think you’re really beautiful.” He pulled back and smiled, a little shyly, beautiful himself. “And if you wanted to get out of here, well...I’d be up for that? If you’re interested?”

Charlie studied him for a long moment, a little woozily. He was in the horrible in-between stage of drunkenness, where he was in control of his faculties enough to think about it, but not enough to think *clearly.* Eric waited patiently, still smiling at him like that, and he wished he were more interested. He desperately wanted something *simple,* something *easy* in his life. Once upon a time, this had been simple. And hell, it still was; the offer had been made, all Charlie had to do was accept it. Why did that seem like such a monumental task?

Maybe it could be that simple, if he just pushed through whatever this was, this wrongness inside him.

“Yeah,” he said at last, “okay.”

* * * * *

“I’m sorry,” Charlie stammered, pulling the sheet around his waist as Eric staggered around the room trying to force his legs into his pants, “okay? I’m just trying to be up front with you. I thought I was ready, but—”

“Right. Of course.” Eric seemed determined to get out of the apartment as soon as humanly possible, and Charlie didn’t have the heart to try and stop him. He *did* wish, though, that he could somehow convince this guy he wasn’t the world’s worst cocktease.

“It’s not you. I promise it’s not you,” he tried again, lamely. Eric shot him a withering look as he pulled his shirt back on.

“You changed your mind the *second* I touched you, but it’s not me,” he said. “Okay, Charlie. You know, if you didn’t want to fuck me, you could have just said so.”

“I—” He’d been about to protest that he *had* wanted to fuck him, but that wasn’t true, was it? He hadn’t been interested from the very beginning; he’d just been trying to convince himself

he could be. Because he still didn't know why he wasn't. "You're right," he said at last. "I'm sorry."

"Wow," Eric breathed, an expression of hurt on his face. "I didn't actually expect you to agree with me."

"I'll walk you out," Charlie said feebly, reaching for his pants, but Eric shoved his arms into his jacket and stormed out of the bedroom.

"I remember where the door is," he called back over his shoulder.

"Bye," Charlie offered, getting only the slamming front door in response.

Alone again. He pulled his knees up against his chest and wrapped his arms around them, feeling absurdly as though he might cry. Why? The situation with Eric had been embarrassing, but it had also been a relief, in a way. Speaking up had saved him from having sex he really didn't want to be having. And he could live with that, if only he knew *why* he didn't want it. Maybe Misha was right, and he did need to see a professional. Maybe he *was* clinically depressed. There was no other explanation he could conjure for the misery that plagued him all the time, the aching sense of loss for—what? He hadn't lost anything. His life was, on paper, going better than ever. New job, more money; so why was he so fucking *sad?*

He finally fell asleep an hour later, face down on a dampened pillow.

* * * * *

Harvey wasn't going to be able to keep this up much longer.

He'd held his own well, for a while. Even though he couldn't see, and the Void Beast had an obvious size advantage, his strategy of *just fucking swing* had been working out. He was pretty sure the Beast had lost a good handful of teeth, and it was clearly enraged, all playfulness gone. But none of this was getting him any closer to Charlie, and as the minutes ticked by, he was becoming more and more frantic. Why did he have such a blunt weapon? Why hadn't he brought something *sharp,* something he could use to slice this monster open?

Dodging a lunge, he slipped on something—a rock, maybe, or one of the broken teeth—and went down hard, sprawling on the cave floor. He rolled over quickly, but not quickly enough: one of the Beast's massive feet slammed down over him like a cage, and he cried out at the horrible, searing pain that went through his shoulder. One of its claws had badly grazed him; a few inches to the left, and it would have speared him straight through. He thrashed wildly, doing his best to free himself, but his upper arms were pinned and he couldn't get enough momentum in his forearm to swing the club.

The Beast leaned in, its mouth just a few scant feet away from his face; he felt the blast of heat as it spoke, the stench of sulfur burning his nose. *"I HAVE HAD ENOUGH,"* it roared, leaving Harvey's ears ringing. He dropped the club, groping frantically for something, *anything* that could help him get free. *"THIS ENDS NOW, HUMAN."*

His fingers scrabbled against something smooth, and he racked his brain, stalling as he tried to grasp it. “So you’re ready to give up?” he shouted back, straining his arm. He was *so close* —

“VERY FUNNY,” it declared, and reared back, preparing to strike. In that moment, his fingers closed around the object, and he realized what it was. With all his strength, he wrenched his forearm backward, then plunged the broken-off tooth directly into the Beast’s foot. It let out a bellow of pain and rage, snatching the foot up and off him; Harvey didn’t waste his chance, leaping to his feet and scrambling away.

As he snatched his club off the floor, running, he lifted his arm half an inch from his face and checked his watch. Four minutes had passed since the Beast had first struck: if he was still in there, Charlie was running out of time.

* * * * *

The professional wasn’t helping.

“I don’t think—I’m not explaining myself well,” Charlie protested, digging his nails into the arms of the chair. This had been a mistake; he hated this little office, in its soothing shades of blue-gray and tastefully chosen furniture. He hated the soft jazz music playing in the background (was jazz meant to be soothing? It always made him sad, for some reason). He was beginning to think he hated the therapist, too, looking at him neutrally over her rectangular glasses. “I just mean that it *literally* feels like I’m in the wrong place and time, like I’m supposed to be somewhere else.”

“As I mentioned before,” she explained patiently, “feelings of temporal dissonance, or anachronism, are more common than you think. Some people feel a strong connection to an earlier decade, or—”

“No,” Charlie interrupted, feeling despair creeping in, “that’s *not* what I’m talking about, I don’t wish I’d been born in the 60s! It’s more like that Talking Heads song, you know, ‘this is not my beautiful house, this is not my beautiful wife—’”

“Are you married? I hadn’t realized.”

Charlie got out of the chair.

* * * * *

He woke from yet another dream he couldn’t remember, so close he could almost reach it with his fingertips, what *was* it, why were there tears on his cheeks again?

* * * * *

“We’re moving you to a new role. You’ll be managing this whole floor.”

“But—I haven’t even been a project manager that long.”

“What can I say? We need someone, and you’re the right man for the job. Congratulations, Charlie. This is a big step up.”

“...Thank you.”

* * * * *

“I just want to go home,” Charlie whispered miserably, half-asleep in his own bed, and then wondered where he was talking about.

* * * * *

“—and as you can see, it has a beautiful view of the park. Units in this building are hard to come by; this is a lucky find, especially at this price.”

“Yeah. It’s nice.”

“Would you like to sleep on it, or…”

“I’ll take it.”

* * * * *

Even Charlie had to admit it was a beautiful day. The weather was unseasonably warm for the fall, golden sunlight slanting through the leaves and falling across their picnic blanket. Jordan told a story, her hands flitting madly in the air; Misha was half-listening, playing with his phone. On another blanket nearby, someone who only knew four chords played an exhaustive repertoire on his guitar. Charlie lay on his back, eating the occasional barbecue chip and staring up at the fluffy clouds. A cooler sweated on the edge of their blanket, stuffed to the brim with beer. Charlie had finished two bottles already, and was performing a cost/benefit analysis on the prospect of getting drunk. On the one hand, he had already been drunk two nights this week, and what had been an occasional indulgence was starting to tilt worryingly towards a habit. On the other, he was so fucking sick of *feeling* things all the time.

His friends were already tired of him, he knew this. The main reason he even had a space on their blanket was because of his new apartment’s proximity to the park; if they invited him along, they had a convenient place to pee and refresh their ice. Their sympathy had dried up probably weeks ago, and he couldn’t blame them. He was boring *himself*. But if anything, he felt the inexplicable sense of grief more keenly every day. It was as though he could feel himself moving further and further away from whatever it was he’d lost, leaving it behind forever.

Four-Chord Guy, apparently mistaking his friends’ polite applause for genuine encouragement, segued into that Green Day song about having the time of your life. Charlie took this as a sign that getting drunk was definitely warranted, and sat up to dig through the cooler.

“Oh, good idea,” Jordan said, interrupting her own story mid-sentence. “Grab me one, would you?”

“Sure.” Charlie pulled out his beers, then a third, because he knew Misha would ask anyway and he might as well save himself the time. He’d just gotten the first bottle open, leaning across the blanket to offer it to Jordan, when he heard a chorus of *oohs* float toward them from the other side of the park.

“Oh, cool! I’ve never seen one this close,” Jordan exclaimed, and Charlie looked up. Floating just over the treeline, clearly still gaining altitude, was an enormous yellow hot-air balloon. He stared at it, the beer in his hand forgotten, and felt something turn over in his mind like a key finally fitting into a lock: a memory of another fall day, hundreds of feet above a patchwork valley, pressing his mouth to a shy smile below bespectacled green eyes.

“Harvey,” he breathed, and the world blinked out of existence around him.

Chapter End Notes

Turns out, hell is being a middle manager at Joja Corp. Are you guys ready for the conclusion of our Skull Cavern adventures? We're so close!

Tomorrow: The battle with the Beast, and what comes after.

Chapter 37: Fall, Year 3

Chapter Summary

The battle with the Beast, and what comes after.

Chapter Notes

We've reached the end of our Skull Cavern adventure! This chapter ALSO contains violence, blood (and some monster bodily fluids), and general peril, but it's the last one. No cliffhangers today, I promise!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The world that came rushing back in bore no resemblance at all to the one he'd just left: instead of a sunny fall day, Charlie was surrounded by darkness and chaos, a suffocating heat pressing against him from all sides. He tried to cry out, but found there was no air; he couldn't tell up from down. Harvey, he needed Harvey, where was he? And suddenly he remembered: the Void Beast, snapping its jaws around him just before he'd woken up at his desk. Had it killed him, then? Or…

No. *The Beast feeds on despair,* the Wizard had said.

Well. He still didn't know how it had happened, but he'd done enough despairing for a lifetime, these past few months. He could only pray it hadn't gotten Harvey, too, that he'd managed to escape and gone back to the farm. (God, he'd been gone for *six months.* Had Harvey already given him up for dead, already mourned him?) Charlie groped around himself in the dark, trying to ignore the heat pressing in on him. There had to be a way out, he had to find it, he wasn't going to die here!

His fingers closed around something hard, and he pulled it toward himself: the hilt of his sword. Well, if he couldn't *find* a way out, he would *make* one. Summoning all his strength, he grabbed the hilt with both hands, then plunged it forward into the smothering darkness. A horrible, ear-shattering noise pierced the air, and he felt himself pitched violently to the side; lifting the sword, he stabbed out again, then again. His vision blurring from the lack of air, he finally saw it, a crack of light ahead. He clawed his way toward it, his hands tearing through the searing nothingness—

Charlie tumbled to the ground through the hole he'd slashed in the Beast's side, his sword clattering after him. Heaving for breath, he squinted up to see the Beast, scrambling from side to side in apparent agony. The noise was incredible; Charlie had never imagined such a

sound, like a bellowing animal and a twenty-car pile-up all blended together. He needed to move or the Beast was going to trample him to death, but he was so tired, *so tired,* if he could just rest for a moment…He let his eyes drift closed.

Through the din, he could almost make out another sound, something achingly familiar. He wanted to turn his head, but exhaustion pinned him in place. The sound grew closer and closer, and finally he understood.

"Charlie!" Harvey shouted, and hands closed around the straps of his backpack; he felt himself being dragged roughly along the ground. He was still *here?* "Charlie, honey, you have to get up!"

"Hrv," Charlie mumbled, trying to respond, "Harrrv, I...can't…"

"It's almost over, Char, almost over, but you have to get up now, we have to—" Something collided hard with Harvey, and he let out a horrible grunt, dropping Charlie back to the earth as he was tossed aside. And all at once, Charlie was awake. Harvey had been blown up; Charlie had been half-drowned and eaten alive; Harvey had been left to fend for himself; Charlie had been tortured by despair. Was he now just going to lie back and let this creature take them down with it? *Absolutely fucking not.*

He dragged himself to his feet, muscles screaming in protest, and gripped the sword once more. A dozen feet away, he could see Harvey stirring, and felt a wash of relief. The Beast flailed in obvious agony, stampeding around the room; it slammed into the walls of the cavern, sending down showers of gravel and dust from the ceiling. Charlie stepped toward it and slipped on something, and looking down, he saw that it was an enormous, broken white tooth. The floor was littered with them, actually, gleaming fangs scattered across the stone. As he puzzled over this, he saw Harvey stagger to his feet and pick up his club, and he understood. Jesus *Christ,* his husband was a badass. How long had they been here? How long had Harvey battled this thing, smashing its teeth out to get to Charlie? Well: they would discuss that later, once they'd dispatched this thing once and for all. For now, there was work to do.

"Hey!" he yelled hoarsely, picking up a broken fang and hurling it at the Beast. "Ugly!"

It hadn't been his most creative epithet, but it worked: the Void Beast spun, blank eyes round above a mouthful of jagged stumps. *"YOU,"* it bellowed, a wheeze apparent even in its deafening roar. *"YOU DID THIS. YOU HAVE WOUNDED ME."*

"Fuckin' right, I have," Charlie shouted back, hoisting the sword into position. "Get over here and let me finish the job."

The Beast charged at him with an ear-splitting sound of rage, but Charlie was prepared this time; he dodged to the left, lashing out with the sword. It barely made contact, grazing the side of the Beast's leg. On its next charge, he managed to scratch its ankle; on the next, his blade hit a claw, glancing off harmlessly. The thing was just too *big;* he couldn't reach its head, which seemed the most obvious way to kill it. As the monster swung around to charge again, he saw a movement out of the corner of his eye: Harvey had come up to stand beside him. Charlie noticed that the shoulder of his tiny jacket was torn and bloodied, a gash in his

skin visible through the torn fabric. He felt the fury pound through his veins all over again; how *dare* this fucking thing, he was going to make it pay—

"YOU COME INTO MY HOME..." the Beast raged.

"Its knee," his husband shouted above the racket, "I've been trying to get its knee, but I can't see it!" The Beast thundered toward them in a blind rage, and Charlie understood what Harvey was suggesting. His every instinct told him to reject the idea, to get Harvey out of harm's way, but he couldn't do this alone; if they were going to succeed, they were going to have to work together.

"YOU STEAL FROM ME…"

"When I say, swing as hard as you can!" he yelled back, and Harvey spread his feet into a batter's stance. Charlie got out of his way, watching with his heart in his throat as the Beast bore down on them.

"AND YOU EXPECT TO LIVE?"

Twenty feet...fifteen...ten...five—

"NOW!" Charlie cried, and Harvey struck out with the club as hard as he could. The resulting crack was so viscerally painful-sounding, Charlie almost felt sorry for the thing. Almost. Its leg went out from under it as Harvey dove away, the bulk of its body thundering into the earth, and Charlie didn't waste his chance: he lunged at the Beast, sword over his head, and plunged it into one of those blank white eyes. The Beast made its most horrible noise yet, and Charlie felt himself sprayed with some kind of effluvia, but he pushed down his revulsion and shoved the sword in further. *Gross, gross, so gross,* his arms were sinking into its eye socket, but it hadn't stopped moving yet and he was *going* to *kill this fucking thing—*

The noise ended. The Beast twitched helplessly, the last frantic impulses of a dying brain, but otherwise did not move. When Charlie went to pull his sword from the monster's skull, he found it was embedded too deeply to remove; after struggling to grasp the slippery hilt for a moment, he gave up and left it there. He could get a new sword.

Or maybe he wouldn't need one anymore.

Amid the ringing silence, Charlie's adrenaline left him. The fight-or-flight response that had kept him upright dissolved in his bloodstream, and he had only enough strength to turn, stumble three steps, and fall into Harvey's arms.

"Whoa, whoa, honey, are you—"

"I missed you," Charlie said, muffled into the side of Harvey's neck. He felt his eyes stinging; was that part of the adrenaline, too? "God, Harvey, I missed you so much."

"Missed me?" Harvey hitched his arms around Charlie a little tighter, pulling him upright. "When?"

“When the Beast had me.” Even amidst the pain and exhaustion, Charlie felt a savage swell of pride. The Beast had done its worst, but it still hadn’t been able to make him forget, not really. He’d still remembered Harvey, if not in his brain, then deep in his heart or his bones.

“When the...but that was only a few minutes, Char. Maybe five?”

Five minutes. Jesus. Charlie felt gladder than ever that the Beast was dead. “Time was...different, in there. For me it was six months,” he whispered, squeezing his eyes shut.

“Six *months!* How did—what happened in there, Charlie?”

Charlie thought about explaining. He stood in the tight, warm circle of Harvey’s arms, every inch of him covered in unspeakable fluids. The corpse of the Beast loomed behind him, his cool lava sword still unfortunately lodged in its brain. He was safe, and it was over, and the thing couldn’t touch him anymore.

It still felt too real. As though if he talked about it, he might somehow reactivate the spell.

“I’ll tell you at home,” he said, and mercifully, Harvey didn’t push.

“That sounds like a great idea.” Charlie felt Harvey’s lips against the top of his head; a shudder of emotion went through his whole body. “You still have the Shard, right?”

Charlie froze. Harvey must have felt him stiffen, because he held him out at arm’s length, an expression of growing alarm on his face.

“Oh, Yoba. It’s not in *there,* is it?”

“No. No. Harvey…” Charlie sighed impatiently. “It was *never* in there.”

“No?”

He reached into Harvey’s jacket pocket. Harvey watched, brow furrowed, as he drew out the Shard: a little linty and blood-streaked, but otherwise none the worse for wear. He held it up; Harvey took it from him, comprehension dawning.

“When you grabbed me,” he said slowly, “you were putting it there?”

“Why do you think I told you to run?”

Harvey made an exasperated sound as he put the Shard back in his pocket. “Because you have no regard for your own safety? Because you wanted to protect me? Because you somehow, for some reason, thought there was the tiniest chance I might actually listen to you? Stop me if I guess correctly.”

“Because I was trying to trick the Beast! If I’d said something, it might have heard me! How did you not notice it in your pocket?!”

“Because I was a little busy trying to get you back!”

Charlie drew a breath to argue further, then stopped, and let it back out. They didn't need to fight about this, especially not here and now. "Forget about it," he said, more gently. "Okay? We were both doing what we thought we had to. It doesn't matter now. We're alive."

Harvey closed his eyes, exhaling. "We're alive," he repeated. "I'd tell you never to do that again, but Yoba, if we ever find ourselves facing down another giant monster, I think we've taken a wrong turn in life somewhere."

"Agreed. Let's get out of here and never come back."

"Can you walk?"

"Yeah." Charlie took his weight back from Harvey, put his hands on his chest, and pushed himself to standing. He took one confident step, giving Harvey a reassuring smile, and then suddenly found himself face-down in the dirt with no explanation.

"On second thought," he mumbled, spitting, "no, maybe?"

Gentle arms came around him, hoisting him back up to his feet; Harvey ducked under his arm, settling it on his good shoulder and wrapping his own arm around Charlie's waist. He smiled ruefully, and Charlie was struck again by how beautiful he was, even streaked with blood and sweat. When they got home, he was going to take a shower, then a nap, and then kiss the daylights out of this man.

"Well," Harvey sighed, "I wish I could just let you sleep while I carried you heroically out of here, but between us we've got one functioning set of legs and one of eyes. So I think we'd better work together for the moment."

"It's not going to hurt your shoulder?"

"Not too much. It isn't as serious as it looks."

"Let's do it, then."

The crawl back to the surface was agonizingly slow. Charlie had lost track of how many floors they'd come down, and he certainly wasn't counting on the way back up, but it was a *fucking lot.* And unlike the mine back home, there was no elevator to speed their trip, just an interminable amount of stairs. Charlie tried hard to keep his heavy eyelids open, but three or four times, he missed warning Harvey about an obstacle and they both went sprawling. He felt like the worst husband in the world; Harvey was doing all the work, dragging both of their bodies up zillions of stairs, and he couldn't even *look at things* well enough to be helpful.

"I'm sorry," he gasped for the tenth time, as Harvey hitched him up on his shoulder again. Out of the corner of his eye, he saw Harvey shaking his head.

"Don't apologize. You're exhausted. And if I hadn't lost my glasses—"

"Yeah, you're right, what were you thinking, getting blown up and half-drowned?"

“You’re joking, but it was my fault!”

“Okay,” Charlie said wearily, forestalling more argument, “new rule. Neither of us can apologize for *anything* that happened in this cave, ever again. It sucked for both of us.”

Harvey was quiet for a moment, only their plodding footsteps breaking the silence, and then he ventured, “You’re right. I’m sorry.”

Charlie whipped his head around to stare at him indignantly, but then he saw the corner of Harvey’s mustache had twitched up; he was joking. Charlie suppressed a giggle, then Harvey snorted, and before long they had to take a break to lean on the wall in a helpless fit of laughter.

“Jesus,” Charlie gasped, burying his face in Harvey’s shoulder. “Movies always skip this part. Where’s the fucking helicopter to get us out of Jurassic Park? Where’s the giant eagle to carry us away from Mount Doom?”

“The Wizard should have given us some kind of scepter that would just, *poof,* blink us back home. Really a major oversight. We’re going to have words.”

“He’d better have some more of that Life Elixir if he knows what’s good for him.” He brushed his fingers against the tear in Harvey’s borrowed jacket, as gently as he could.

“I’ll be okay,” Harvey assured him. “Nothing some good stitches can’t handle.”

Charlie wondered who, exactly, was going to stitch him; they’d have to go to the city and see a doctor, he supposed. Logically, he knew, they’d been gone less than a day, but he felt as though he hadn’t been home in half a year. He wished fervently that they were both in better shape, that they could just go home to their dog and their bed. The thought of all they had to do instead—medical treatment, the inevitable debrief with Qi and the Wizard—momentarily overwhelmed him.

“Let’s take a break for a sec, okay, darlin’?”

It took them several more breaks and much, much longer than Charlie would have liked, but at last, they found themselves stepping through the invisible barrier that had so stubbornly kept them out on the first floor. He fought the urge to lie down and go to sleep right there on the sandstone. Just a few more steps, he thought, hobbling along beside Harvey. They just had to make it out the door, and then to the Oasis. Poor Harvey’s hair and collar were soaked with sweat; every step he took was obviously exhausting him. “Just a little more, V,” Charlie urged gently. “You’ve been amazing, you did it, I can’t believe—”

“Gentlemen! You’re back!” called a voice through the open door, startling Harvey so badly he nearly dropped Charlie. They stepped out into the stone entrance chamber, the chill of the desert night blowing in through the doorway. Charlie shivered, huddling closer to Harvey, and then he saw them: Qi and the Wizard, standing just outside. The torchlight illuminated their faces, and for a moment Charlie thought a monster must have followed them; Qi looked stunned, his mouth agape, and even the Wizard wore an expression of concern.

“Charlie,” Qi said weakly, “Harvey. What...what *happened?”*

Charlie took a moment to see the scene from an outsider’s perspective. Both of them wore pants that had basically ceased to exist below the knee. Charlie had lost one of his shoes. His shirt hung in tatters, and Harvey still wore the remains of his ill-fitting jacket. The fabric around the tear in the shoulder was soaked with blood, and Harvey’s arms and face were covered in scratches, not to mention the split across the bridge of his nose where his now-absent glasses had cut into him. Charlie couldn’t see himself, but he knew he was still covered in Beast viscera, his hair plastered to his head and angry fire-bat welts standing out on his arms. He supposed they probably were kind of alarming.

“Just...lots of things.”

“The Beast,” the Wizard said, his tone hushed. “I can no longer feel its influence. Did it leave the cavern?”

“Kind of,” Charlie said grimly. “It’s dead.”

That got their attention. Both Qi and the Wizard looked even more shocked, staring.

“Dead? That’s impossible.”

“Not impossible, actually.”

“It—you—you *fought* it? This was meant to be a stealth mission!”

“Yeah, well, it turns out we’re not that stealthy.”

“It ate Charlie,” Harvey added. “Didn’t leave us much choice, really.”

Charlie could see the two of them visibly struggling to decide which question to ask first, and decided to head them off before they really got going. It was starting to get chilly out here. “Look, we’ll answer whatever you want later, but the basics are: we killed it, we got the Shard, we got out. Can we just leave it there for now?”

The Wizard and Qi glanced at each other, having a silent conversation. “Yes, of course,” Qi said at last.

“Are you injured?” the Wizard asked.

“I’m okay, just tired, but Harvey’s hurt. He needs a doctor. Can you take us to one?”

“We will get you help right away,” Qi assured them, still looking worried. “Forgive me for asking, I recognize that you two have been through a great deal, but...may I see it?”

Charlie nodded at Harvey, who reached into his pocket and drew out the Shard. Even in the semidarkness, it threw off the same disco-ball glitter it had back in the cavern. Qi and the Wizard both leaned in close, identical expressions of awe on their faces.

“Rasmodius, is it…”

“It is genuine.”

Qi turned his attention back to Harvey and Charlie, looking between them. “I find myself at a loss for words, gentlemen,” he said. “I had faith in you, but still, to see it here…” He cleared his throat and straightened, giving a businesslike tug to the hem of his jacket. “The last thing I want is to impose upon you further. But there is one more thing we must do, right now, before another word is spoken. Follow me, if you would.”

Harvey took a weary, plodding step forward, but Charlie dug his heels in. “Something *else?* Look, Qi, whatever it is, it can wait. My husband is bleeding, and I can barely stand up.”

“I understand, Charlie, and I truly apologize, but every moment we delay is another opportunity for evil to regain a foothold here.”

“What evil? The Beast is gone.”

“True, but it was only one. The Void is home to many others, who may sense the presence of the Shard as it did.”

Charlie puffed himself up, more arguments on his lips, but Harvey shook his head. “Let’s just go, sunflower,” he murmured, resting his head on Charlie’s for a moment. “Whatever it is he wants, let’s just do it and be done.”

They didn’t have far to go, at least. It was an odd little parade: Qi in the front, Charlie and Harvey hobbling along after him on the sand, the Wizard in the back. Charlie wondered why he wasn’t walking up front with Qi, and then felt himself enveloped by a delicious warmth; he craned his neck over his shoulder to see Rasmodius, hands outstretched, muttering under his breath.

“I wonder how hard it is to learn magic,” Charlie whispered to Harvey under his breath.

“Very hard,” Rasmodius called.

“Just ahead, just there!” Qi said, pointing. At first, Charlie thought it was just a patch of desert like any other, but then he noticed the posts: a trio of golden pillars, slender and towering, set in a rough triangle in the sand. Qi hurried to the center of the triangle, frowning at the ground and muttering to himself.

“It has to be *exact,* Qi, remember,” the Wizard said, in a tone that suggested they’d had this conversation before. “If we are off by even a few inches—”

“It’s here!” Qi stood in the center, turning slowly in place. “I’m sure of it. This is the spot.”

“The spot for *what?”* Harvey asked, before Charlie could ask the same question.

“The Shard,” Qi said, stretching a hand out toward them urgently. “Give it to me, please.”

“Okay, but why?”

“That will become clear.” He made a little impatient gesture, the first time Charlie had ever seen him anything but smoothly polite. “Please, there’s no time to argue.”

Harvey took it out of his pocket, glancing at Charlie as he did, and Charlie knew what he was remembering: the Beast’s warning in the cavern, its claims that Qi wanted the shard for his own ends. Had it been telling the truth?

But oh, hell. They’d come this far. There wasn’t much point in questioning now.

“Fine,” he said, taking the Shard from Harvey. He limped the few steps to Qi, handing it over and hoping he hadn’t just made a huge mistake.

Qi raised the Shard into the sky, holding it high above his head, and waited. It should have been silly, this strange little man in his sparkly outfit, holding up a rock as though he expected to be struck by lightning. But something about the setting—the moonlight, the stillness of the desert, Charlie’s own near-delirious exhaustion—gave it a gravity he wouldn’t have expected. He felt a hand on his arm; the Wizard had come up beside him, urging him backward, out of the triangle.

“What’s he doing?” Harvey whispered.

“He’s holding it up in the air. I don’t know why, what’s going to happen, Razmo?”

It was a sign of how serious the situation was that Rasmodius didn’t even react to the nickname. “One moment,” he murmured. “It should...yes... *there!”*

The effect was so dramatic, even Harvey had to see it. The three pillars began to glow, gaining in intensity as though lit from within. Their light grew brighter and more focused, a deep, subterranean humming sound building with it. Just when it had become so bright Charlie could hardly stand to look, a beam of light shot out from each pillar, converging on Qi. They hit the Shard and bounced upward, beaming impossibly high into the sky.

“Is he all right?” Charlie shouted, the humming drowning out all other sound.

“Watch!” Rasmodius shouted back.

All at once, everything stopped. The light disappeared; the humming dropped away, leaving the silence of the desert behind. Qi stood in the same place, something in his hand still glowing, but it looked...bigger?

Charlie hobbled toward him again, squinting. “Qi? You okay?”

The look on Qi’s face stopped him in his tracks. He gazed up at the glowing thing in his hand, his glasses slightly askew, with a look of... *longing.* His eyes were wide, the corners of his mouth downturned, and it was clear that he desperately wanted whatever it was he held in his hand. For a moment, his stomach dropped. The Beast *had* been right; whatever this was, Qi had wanted it for himself.

But then Qi turned to him, the glow fading, and held the thing out. His hand and voice trembled. “Here,” he urged, “take it.”

It was a sword, but not like any sword Charlie had ever seen. Its blade and hilt both shone deep purple, gleaming even in the dim light. Charlie reached out tentatively, his fingers brushing against Qi's on the hilt, and took it. The metal was warm in his hand, and impossibly light, as though it were a rapier rather than a broadsword. He gave it an experimental little swing; it cut through the air effortlessly, without even a *swoosh.*

"The Galaxy Sword," Qi said, standing back. He still wore that pained look, but his voice had lost its tremor. "An exceptionally powerful blade, and in this form, it holds no appeal to monsters like the Void Beast. Unbreakable, impossible to dull or chip, and once given to you, impossible for any other to use."

"You made it," Charlie pointed out, examining the point. "Why can I use it?"

"Because I'm giving it to you," Qi said, and Charlie looked up sharply. "That blade belongs in the hands of someone who can use it to protect the Valley, should any other evil arise."

"But I—look, Qi, thank you, but no," Charlie said, holding it out to him with both hands. "We've done our thing. We're done now. I'm not going back into the mines; I don't want to fight anymore."

"I don't want you to fight anymore either, Charlie. In fact, it's my devout hope that the sword hangs on your wall, collecting dust, for the rest of your days." Charlie felt a hand on the small of his back; Harvey had come up beside him, looking down at the sword (or the purplish blur, Charlie supposed) with an unreadable expression. Charlie caught his gaze, trying to transmit his conflicted thoughts telepathically. If they'd entered the realm of magic space swords, maybe ESP wasn't too far behind? "But the fact remains that someone needs to be...available. To be willing to help, if the day comes."

Charlie stared down at the sword, warm and light in his hand. Objectively, it was one of the coolest things he'd ever seen. And Qi was giving him—what, some kind of weird knighthood? Making him, essentially, Batman, always keeping an eye on the signal in the sky? The Charlie who had walked into the mines for the first time two years ago would have lost his mind with excitement over this: being marked as some kind of Chosen One, being told that the fate of the Valley rested on his shoulders.

The Charlie of today, shivering and exhausted, standing in the desert with his bloodied husband at his side and too many near-death experiences at his back, didn't want it. He wanted to go home, tend to his crops and animals, and never think about this again. Surely there was someone else. The Adventurers' Guild, wasn't this kind of thing why they existed? Couldn't he just give it away?

But he turned and looked up at Harvey again, the dark circles under his eyes and the blood drying on his skin. He knew, instinctively, that Harvey would go along with whatever he decided. Whether or not he accepted the sword, they would go home together, resume their normal lives. They would bottle wine and milk cows. They would dance in their living room, read on the sofa, watch *Star Trek,* walk Bones, make love to each other by firelight. They would wait for the eventual phone call that would make them parents.

And years later, when they had those children, if a new horror threatened them...was he *really* going to leave the job of protecting them to someone else?

"Okay," Charlie said hoarsely, then cleared his throat and tried again. "Okay." Harvey's hand tightened around his waist, and just as instinctively, Charlie knew he was proud of him. Maybe they were getting the hang of the ESP thing after all.

"Thank you, gentlemen," Qi said, sounding relieved. "And now, it is our turn to assist *you.* Rasmodius, would you…?"

"Of course." Charlie turned, and Rasmodius was already swinging his arm through the air, the blazing circle opening again. Through it, Charlie saw the sitting room of the Oasis suite they'd stayed in. He felt a pang of longing; *god,* he wanted to go, to soak himself clean in that heavenly tub and then sleep for hours, but he couldn't. Not yet.

"Thanks, really, but we need to go to the hospital. Harvey's shoulder needs stitches, and—"

"I will tend your wounds myself," Rasmodius interrupted. "I assure you, I'm a gifted healer. I will put you both in a magical sleep, and you'll wake to find yourselves as good as new."

This sounded vaguely alarming to Charlie, but then he supposed the Life Elixir had worked the way it was intended. Still: a magic sedative? Couldn't they just have some good old-fashioned drugs? "Up to you," he said to Harvey, stroking the hair back from his forehead. "We can go to the city instead, if you want. I'll do anything."

Harvey closed his eyes, leaning into Charlie's touch. "What I want is to go home as soon as possible," he sighed. "And these wounds aren't going to be easy to explain. So, I guess...magic it is?"

"Magic it is," Charlie agreed, and they stepped through the portal together.

* * * * *

Harvey had expected his eventual return to consciousness to be hard: gummy eyes, pounding head, aching shoulder, all of his nerve endings protesting. He was surprised, then, at how peaceful his awakening really was. His ears woke before his eyes; birds chirped from somewhere outside, but something about them sounded off, not the usual bluebirds and robins that nested outside his bedroom. As he shifted on the pillow, he realized the sheets were much silkier than the ones he normally slept on. Opening his eyes, he saw the blurry bedroom of the suite in Qi's casino—but more importantly, he saw Charlie, stirring a little on the other pillow.

It was over. Charlie was alive, he was safe, they had made it through. Relief flooding his veins, he indulged himself in just watching for a while. He studied his husband's improbably dark eyebrows, knitting a little, as though wakefulness were a pesky insect he could brush away. To Harvey's surprise, he looked well-rested; the dark circles had faded from below his eyes, and his skin was rosy beneath his freckles. Harvey reached out and traced the trajectory of an auburn curl, remembering the way it had spent yesterday plastered to Charlie's head.

Already, their time in Skull Cavern was beginning to feel like a bad dream. Monsters, explosions, bottomless chasms: how could it be anything else?

As he woke up, he struggled to recall how he'd gotten to bed. The last thing he remembered was getting into the bathtub. Had he fallen asleep in there? Who had put his clothes back on? Wait—did he even *have*— He checked, leaning away from Charlie long enough to peer under the duvet. Though neither of them wore a shirt, they both wore loose pajama pants. Yoba only knew where they'd come from. Were they magical pants of some kind? Had the Wizard conjured them from thin air?

"I did the same thing," said Charlie's sleep-roughened, chuckling voice. Harvey's gaze snapped to him immediately. "Don't get me wrong, I love waking up naked with you, but I like it better when I can remember what happened the night before."

"Charlie," Harvey whispered. "Hi."

"Good morning, beautiful." Charlie's face blossomed into a slow, private smile, one Harvey couldn't help returning. He leaned in to kiss him, gentle and lingering, a weightless joy spreading through his body. Was it just relief at having come out the other side in one piece, or had the Void Beast been affecting him all this time? Either way, he felt truly free for the first time in months. He wrapped a hand around the back of Charlie's neck, loving the feeling of his husband's skin under his hands, warm and alive and *here.*

When at last they broke away, Charlie didn't go far, leaning their foreheads together. Harvey was surprised at the expression on his face; though he still smiled, his brow was furrowed, as though he were fighting back some emotion. Harvey traced a finger over the line between his brows. "Something wrong?"

"No," Charlie assured him, with a little shake of his head. "I just...I got worried, when I was waking up. I was afraid those six months were real, and *this* was the dream."

Harvey still didn't know what had happened to Charlie in the Void, but he knew they were going to have to break it all down for Qi and the Wizard later, and he didn't want to make Charlie tell it all more than once; he got the impression it had been a nightmare. "It felt that real?"

"Yeah. And, you know…" The corner of his mouth quirked up ruefully. "Occam's razor. In one life, I was alone, and in the other, I had you. Of *course* I thought you were the dream."

Harvey couldn't think of a sufficient response to this, and at any rate he wasn't sure he could speak past the lump in his throat. Instead of responding, he buried his face in Charlie's neck, wrapping all his limbs around him. He remembered, somewhere in his earliest memories of Charlie, thinking the same thing about him once: lying awake the first night they'd spent together, convinced he would wake to find he'd imagined it all. He didn't want Charlie to feel the same doubt.

"I'm real," he mumbled into Charlie's skin. "It's over."

“It’ll feel over once we’re home,” Charlie sighed. “What time is it? Should we get up, go find Razmo and Qi?”

Harvey checked the bedside clock, squinting. “Yoba,” he said. “It’s almost four P.M. We really were exhausted.”

“I wonder why.”

“I don’t think I’ve ever been this stubbly,” Harvey added, scratching at his jaw. “Did the Wizard’s healing spell make our hair grow on overdrive or something?”

“Don’t know about that, but…” Charlie reached out, smoothing a finger over Harvey’s shoulder. Squinting down at himself, Harvey could just make out a thin white line, running from the back of his shoulder to the front. It was such a tidy scar, it was almost impossible to believe it had been a jagged claw wound the night before. He brushed a hand over Charlie’s own shoulder scar, his mouth twisting ruefully.

“I’m sorry,” he said. “Doesn’t seem fair that mine looks like this, and yours…”

“Don’t.” Charlie closed his hand over Harvey’s, holding it against his scarred skin. “I don’t mind it anymore. It’s kind of...a memento. Of how you saved me.” He smiled. “I’ll take you over the Wizard any day, darlin’.”

Harvey knew they were supposed to be getting out of bed, but how was he ever going to manage it, if Charlie was going to say things like *that?*

Rasmodius and Qi, as it turned out, were simple to find. When Charlie and Harvey went poking around for them an hour later—Charlie leading Harvey with their fingers intertwined, since Harvey still didn’t have glasses—they found them exactly where all of it had started: in Qi’s office. Even with Harvey’s eyesight, they were an easy pair to spot. Though they’d been deep in conversation before, huddled over Qi’s desk, they straightened as soon as Charlie and Harvey walked in.

“Gentlemen!” Qi cried, rounding the desk with his arms open. “You’re awake!”

“That magical sedative was some strong stuff, Razmo,” Charlie said, stifling a yawn. “Can’t believe we slept for...what, like 16 hours?”

At this, Qi and Rasmodius looked at each other; Harvey couldn’t make out the expressions on their faces, but the movement instantly put him on edge. “Well,” Qi hedged, “a little longer than that, I’m afraid.”

“Healing is never instant, even with magic,” the Wizard added. “It takes time.”

“It’s five P.M.,” Harvey said, wishing he could see them clearly. “Have we been asleep for an *entire day?”*

“Four days, actually,” Rasmodius said.

Harvey felt an unpleasant jolt at this, but it was nothing compared to Charlie's reaction. *"What?"* he demanded, his tone disbelieving. "It's been—that's—our animals! Our crops! They've been alone this entire time, you have to send us back *right now—"*

"Calm down, calm down," the Wizard said almost lazily, waving a hand. "Of course they haven't been alone. I have unraveled the mysteries of the arcane; do you honestly think I can't figure out how to care for a farm for a few days?"

"It's harder than it looks," Charlie huffed, and Harvey gave a nod of solidarity.

"I have ensured that your crops received adequate water, fed all of your animals, milked the cows and goat, collected chicken eggs, and allowed your rather hyperactive dog to sleep in my tower. Have I forgotten anything?"

"Yeah," Charlie said. "You forgot to tell us you were putting us to sleep for half a week."

"My friends," Qi said placatingly, stepping forward. "We could continue this argument, or we could sit down to dinner. My staff has already set a table for us on the balcony; may we move the discussion there, and perhaps hear your story over a drink? The chef will begin working on our meal at once." He turned toward Harvey. "I am sorry I can't offer you any help for your vision. If it won't be terribly uncomfortable for you, I'd ask you to join us for dinner, and then we will send you straight home."

"I *am* pretty hungry," Harvey murmured to Charlie. Charlie sighed, squeezing his hand.

"Yeah, okay."

Harvey had eaten dinner with Charlie and Qi in this same spot before, of course. But it felt very different now, with the danger and mystery behind them. Rasmodius was a much less pleasant conversationalist than Qi, but fortunately he seemed more interested in listening than speaking. Once they'd settled in with their cocktails—some kind of fruity desert concoction involving cactus juice, Harvey didn't know what it was but he wasn't complaining—Qi sat forward, propping his elbows on the table.

"So," he said. "Tell us everything."

It had been the longest day of their lives, back in the Cavern, but the retelling went relatively quickly. Charlie gave them the shorthand version of each major event: the first mummy swarm leading to their trip downriver; their precarious trek over the chasm; all the serpents and fire bats they encountered along the way. Qi was silent, looking between them attentively and occasionally gasping. Even Rasmodius sat forward once or twice. But when Charlie reached the moment when Harvey's bag had exploded, he faltered. He looked at Harvey, his brows drawing together, and Harvey covered his hand with his own.

"And then I nearly got myself blown up," Harvey continued for him, "and Charlie very heroically jumped two floors down into a lake, pulled me out, and gave me the Life Elixir. We lost most everything in the process, my glasses, all the bombs and medical supplies, but…"

“But we’d come so far,” Charlie finished, turning his hand over and squeezing Harvey’s gratefully. “So we went on.”

They talked through the rest of the journey, taking turns filling in details, while food gradually appeared on the table. Harvey *was* hungry, and everything was equally as delicious as last time, but he knew they were rapidly approaching new territory: the story of Charlie’s time in the Void. He found his appetite waning a little as it grew closer.

“And that’s when it…ate you?” Qi asked Charlie, his voice hushed and rapt.

Charlie nodded. “Harvey fought it while I was inside—”

“Fought is too strong a word, I really just stalled it—”

“Don’t let him downplay it, by the time I got back he’d knocked out half its teeth and royally pissed it off,” Charlie argued firmly. Harvey felt his cheeks heat, and fell silent. “Who knows what it would have done with me if he hadn’t kept it busy?”

“What *did* it do with you?” Rasmodius asked, piping up for the first time in ages. “When you were swallowed. What happened?”

“It sent him to the Void,” Harvey replied, and they all swiveled to look at him. Charlie’s eyes widened.

“Is *that* what it was?”

“That’s what it told me, at least. It said it was sending you to the Void, and that you would, um, you would die there. I told it that wasn’t really an acceptable arrangement for me,” he finished feebly.

“What was it like?” This came from Rasmodius, who was now leaning forward on the table, looking just as enthralled as Qi had earlier. Harvey found himself irritated at the man’s obvious enthusiasm. Charlie had nearly died; this wasn’t some kind of science experiment.

“It was my old life,” Charlie said simply. Harvey looked at him in surprise. He supposed he’d picked up too much religious imagery over the years—he’d imagined hellfire and brimstone, eternal torment, that kind of thing. “I woke up back in my desk at Joja, and I got promoted right away, which I thought was weird…”

He walked them through it: his rapid rise through the ranks at Joja, his crippling sadness, his friends’ attempts to fix him—and his mother’s attempts to fix him *up*. “Everyone thought it was depression,” he said. “Which, I guess it was, but there was a *reason* for it.” Harvey felt his confusion grow as Charlie spoke.

“I don’t understand, honey,” he said, when Charlie had paused to take a drink. “If the Beast was trying to torment you, why were you getting promoted, getting a nicer apartment? Why not stick you with a low-level job, or get you fired, or—”

“Because it wasn’t the life I wanted,” Charlie said. “Don’t you see? I never liked it at Joja, in real life I mean, but I probably wouldn’t have quit if I’d been really successful there. I would

have kept telling myself that I was doing great, and stuck with it, even though I was miserable."

Ah. Harvey *did* see. He almost couldn't picture it: his vibrant, cheerful husband, always freckly from sunshine and working happily in the fields, condemned instead to a thin, grey life behind a desk he hated. "What happened then?" Qi prodded.

"Then," Charlie said, squeezing his hand again, "I went to a park with my old friends, and we saw a hot-air balloon. And suddenly I just remembered, Harvey, the Valley, the Beast, all of it. And I woke up inside the Beast and slashed my way out."

"Wait," Qi said.

"Why would a hot-air balloon do that?" Rasmodius demanded. Harvey's cheeks burned again, and he felt such a helpless affection for Charlie he nearly kissed him right then and there. "They are not inherently magical objects—"

"We had our first kiss in one," Charlie declared, totally unabashed. "It left an impression."

"You are telling me," Rasmodius intoned, "that you escaped from an astral projection into *the Void* by *remembering your first kiss?"*

"It was a fucking great kiss, okay?"

"Rasmodius, you've told me yourself that a powerful emotion can prompt a surge in magical energy. Is it really such a stretch that a surge like that could disrupt a projection?" Qi sounded reasonable, almost placating, but the Wizard continued to splutter indignantly.

"No—I mean, of course it's *plausible,* it's just—the Void Beast was an exceptionally powerful magical being, and Charlie is a mundane, I don't—"

"You should try being in love sometime, Razmo," Charlie said. "Does wonders for your arcane energies, or whatever." Even without being able to make out his facial features, Harvey could sense the daggers Rasmodius stared at Charlie. He wondered if Charlie had hit a nerve.

"Fine," the Wizard spat. "So after your *escape—"*

"We fought it," Harvey interrupted, wanting to wrap this up so they could go home and talk more about this hot-air balloon revelation. "I hit it in the knee with my club."

"And I stabbed it in the fucking brain," Charlie finished. "Not very magical, I'll grant you, but it seemed to do the trick."

Silence fell over the table. Qi sat back heavily, rubbing at his eyes under his glasses; Rasmodius took a deep drink of his wine. Something floated up from the back of Harvey's brain, something he had wondered about but discarded as unimportant in the heat of the moment. "It knew you," he said, gesturing at Qi and Rasmodius with his fork. "The Beast. 'The Collector' and 'The Wizard,' it called you. It told us not to trust you."

Rasmodius straightened in his seat, an indignant look on his face. “That is absurd. It—”

“It was right,” Qi said, and they all turned to look at him in surprise. He wore a smile on his face, but it was a bitter expression, hard and unhappy. “Or rather, it would have been, once. Not all of my wealth was acquired through, shall we say, scrupulous means. I like to think I’m a changed man, and that my motives in this case were pure, but it had reason to doubt.”

“But how did it know you?” Charlie pressed. “What did you—I mean, how—”

“Stories for another day, I’m afraid,” Qi said, almost gently. “I’m not half so interesting as the two of you. I’ll regale you someday, if you really want to hear. For now…” He waved at a staff member, who hurried forward and deposited their desserts: some kind of airy mousse, garnished with a perfect curl of coconut. “I find it difficult to express the enormity of our debt to you, gentlemen. Not only *ours.* The entirety of the Ferngill Republic owes you its safety and happiness.”

“It does,” Rasmodius agreed, without a trace of grudge in his tone.

“The two of you will be hailed as heroes, once the story spreads. When people hear—”

“They won’t,” Harvey interrupted, feeling suddenly certain. He and Charlie hadn’t discussed it, but he *knew,* feeling their intertwined fingers, that they were in agreement on this. He glanced over, his confidence growing at the look on Charlie’s face: calm, steady, at peace. “No one is going to find out.”

The blur of Qi looked shocked. “But—Dr. Harvey, you saved a *nation* at great personal cost, surely you’d prefer some *recognition!”*

“We wouldn’t,” Charlie piped up, his profile glowing like fire in the sunset. “It would only scare people. They don’t need to know, they deserve to live in peace.”

“We may tell one or two friends,” Harvey added, thinking of Shane and Maru. Someday, he thought, they’d share it with them. “But we don’t want to be heroes.”

“What *do* you want to be?” the Wizard asked, exasperated.

“Farmers,” Charlie replied, with a little laugh. “Parents. You know. Just…”

“Happy,” Harvey finished, and Charlie lifted his hand to kiss it.

“Yeah. That about sums it up.”

Harvey saw Qi and Rasmodius turn to each other, apparently communicating without words again. At last, Qi turned back to them.

“I won’t force you to take credit where it’s due,” he said. “But I must insist on *some* small reward, I’m afraid.”

“No need—”

“We don’t—”

“The suite,” he said over them, gesturing in the direction of their room. “If I cannot persuade you to accept anything else, then please, consider the suite yours. You may treat it as your home away from home; come anytime you like, and enjoy the amenities.”

“Mr. Qi, that’s too much,” Charlie argued. “We can’t just—”

“Please,” Qi repeated, leaning forward on his elbows. “It’s a paltry offering in the face of what you’ve done, Charlie, Harvey. Allow me to do this one thing for you. It would be my genuine honor.”

Harvey didn’t want to be famous, and he didn’t want to be rich, but he knew when to accept a gift. Qi seemed desperate to give them something for their trouble, and…

And oh, hell. It *was* an incredible suite.

“Thank you, Mr. Qi,” he said, dropping his hand to Charlie’s knee and squeezing it. “That’s very generous of you. We’ll be happy to accept.”

“Yes, thank you,” Charlie added, and Harvey was relieved at the sincerity in his voice.

“Think nothing of it. I hope to host you both often.”

“We’d probably make it more often if we didn’t have to trust Pam’s driving,” Charlie joked. “Don’t suppose you can teach me that portal trick, can you, Raz?”

“It is not a trick,” Rasmodius insisted.

“I know, I know. I’m just—”

“But,” he continued, interrupting, “I’ll see what I can do.”

Charlie’s delighted grin lasted through dessert. It lasted through their trek back to the suite *(their* suite, Harvey supposed), through one final conversation with Qi and the Wizard where Qi mostly just rambled about how proud he was of them both. It lasted through the Wizard’s portal spell, and through their very short trip to their bedroom on the other side. When Harvey fished his old, spare pair of glasses out of his nightstand and brought the world back into blissful focus, it was still there: Charlie radiated happiness, in such potent waves Harvey wondered if he wasn’t a little bit magical after all.

“There you are,” he said, going up on his tiptoes to kiss the bridge of Harvey’s nose. “Come on, let’s go outside. I miss Bones and the girls.”

“Four days *is* a long time.”

“Or six months, depending how you count it.”

Chapter End Notes

I promised it would be OK, didn't I? I live for angst and danger, but I can't resist a happy ending. They deserved it. I hope the conclusion of their little adventure was satisfying!

But we're not quite at the end of their story, we still have a few chapters left! My only content warnings for the next chapters are a bit of residual angst, a whole lot of fluff/schmoop, some NSFW scenes, and some unexpected facial hair.

Tomorrow: Charlie struggles to come all the way home. Harvey shows him the way.

Chapter 38: Fall, Year 3

Chapter Summary

Charlie struggles to come all the way home. Harvey shows him the way.

Chapter Notes

All the violence is over! But we do still have a little bit of angst to get through. (Along with a lot of fluff.) This chapter is about 75% NSFW content, and involves some rough (but enthusiastically consensual!) sex. Just FYI!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Two days after their return, Harvey stood at the mirror, contemplating his chin. He'd shaved the day before their trip underground, but he'd been too busy getting back into the swing of farm life to do it since their return. The result was a week's worth of stubble, the most he'd seen on his face since the day he'd first picked up a razor. His own jawline looked alien and unfamiliar. He kind of *looked* like a guy who had been adventuring in a monster-infested cavern.

But oh, well: time to return to the real world. He swirled his shaving brush in its cup, lathering up the bristles. As he raised it to his neck, his eye caught a movement in the doorway: Charlie, leaning against the frame.

"Time to shave, huh?"

"I think so," Harvey said, smiling at him in the mirror. "Unless I want to go the full beard route." He smoothed the foam onto his throat in long, practiced strokes, focusing on his task. It took him a moment to realize that Charlie hadn't said anything. He paused, glancing back over his shoulder; Charlie looked away quickly, his cheeks tinted pink under his freckles. "You don't... *want* me to go the beard route, do you?"

"I want you to do what you want with your own facial hair," Charlie said firmly, still not meeting his eyes. The corner of his mouth twitched.

"You're the only one," Harvey said dryly. "I think you're the only person I know who's never given me grief about my mustache."

"Hey, I love your mustache," Charlie protested, finally looking at him. "I've never even seen you without it. It's part of your face."

“It isn’t too ticklish when I kiss you?”

Charlie gave him a devilish smirk. “It tickles when you do *other* things.”

“Mm. You don’t seem to mind.”

“Not at all.”

“Well,” Harvey went on, “of course I’ll do what I want. But if, by chance, my *husband* liked the stubble, and wanted to see what the beard would look like—and whether it also tickles—I could…be persuaded.”

Charlie’s face lit up, and without another word, Harvey wiped the foam off his throat with a damp towel. A little itchiness was a small price to pay for his beloved’s happiness... *and* his curiosity, he thought, with a little shiver.

The only thing was, over the next few days, Harvey noticed that Charlie’s happiness seemed to be a little bit lacking. He returned Harvey’s smiles, laughed at his jokes, leaned into his hugs like he always had. But he rarely seemed to smile first, and he never told jokes of his own. To say nothing of the physical contact: to the casual observer, things might have seemed normal. Affectionate, even. But Harvey had been living with Charlie for almost two years, and he knew the difference. Knew how Charlie usually couldn’t pass by him as they went about their day without touching him—a hand at the small of his back, a kiss brushed against his cheek, fingers threading through his hair. Since their return from Skull Cavern, those casual touches had all but vanished. It was as though this Charlie were a very talented understudy, and since Harvey had spent the last two years sitting in the front row of his life, he could tell.

And then there was the sex, or lack thereof. Harvey thought nothing of it at first. They’d been worn out by their ordeal, and then they’d had to reassume their lives. It was a busy season for both the farm and the clinic, as always, and it wasn’t entirely unexpected that they’d collapse into bed at night. But Charlie maintained his careful, friendly distance even here. He kissed Harvey good night, sometimes even stroked admiringly over the growth of his beard, but then retreated to his own side of the bed. He didn’t hold Harvey; he didn’t cuddle, didn’t fling an arm over him and pull him close. Harvey began to notice it on day four, to fret a little on day seven, and to actively worry on day ten. Had something happened to Charlie in the Void, something that had sent him back out irrevocably changed?

Harvey had his theories. In some ways, he was reminded of that tense, anxious time before their biggest fight: the distance, the anxiety, the dancing around an obvious problem. But things were different now, and Harvey was different, too. His worries were for *Charlie,* for his happiness and well-being, not for their relationship or for himself. He knew they could survive whatever was going on, and that they would come out the other side stronger than ever. They just had to talk about it first, and it was a difficult conversation to start.

One night, just before the two-week mark, Harvey found his opening. He and Charlie had said good night, kissed, laid down to sleep. But as the minutes ticked by, Harvey (who nearly

always took ages to fall asleep, the unfortunate byproduct of his anxiety) realized Charlie wasn't dozing off. Though he was still, he was obviously wide awake: silent breathing, tension in his limbs. Harvey rolled toward him, suddenly wide-awake himself. This had gone on long enough; middle of the night or not, it was time.

"I'm surprised you're not sleeping," he murmured, nudging Charlie's ankle with his toes. Charlie rolled his head on the pillow, looking over at him.

"Not as tired as I thought, I guess."

"Anything on your mind?"

"Nothing to worry about." Charlie gave him another of those smiles, one that didn't reach his eyes. "You get some sleep, darlin'." He turned away again, closing his eyes, though Harvey knew he was no closer to sleeping. He waited, gathering his thoughts, calling up the words he had been mentally choosing and holding back for days.

"You know," he said, striving for a light and even tone, "you can tell me anything, Char. No matter what. I'm not going to judge you, I just want you to be happy."

"I am happy," Charlie insisted. "Everything is fine."

"I believe you, I do. But...we never really talked about what happened to you. In the Void, I mean. It was a big thing; it would make sense if you were still kind of processing it."

A long moment passed in silence. At last Charlie spoke, quiet in the darkness.

"You see everything, don't you," he whispered.

"Not everything," Harvey countered gently. "I can only see you're unhappy. I can't see why."

"I'm not unhappy. *Really,"* he added, glancing across his face as though worried Harvey would argue with him. "I'm here, I'm with you, everything's fine. I'm so, so glad to be home."

"I know you are." Harvey was sure *that* much was true, at least.

"I just…" Charlie scrubbed his hands over his face, sighing. "I don't always feel like I *am* back. I was gone for so long, and it was all so sudden, *poof* I'm there, *poof* I'm here. For everyone else it was a day, but for me it was half a year. I missed everyone, I missed everything, but I couldn't remember why. It really fucked with my head, V. What am I forgetting now? How do I know it all won't just disappear again?"

Harvey's heart lurched in his chest. He felt a deep, impotent fury, a burning hatred for the dead Beast, for the pain it had put Charlie through. "You are not going to disappear," he said, closing his fingers around Charlie's wrist. "I wouldn't let you go last time. I won't now, either."

"I keep thinking, what if I hadn't seen that balloon, what if I'd never snapped out of it?"

“You would have. Charlie. You *would* have,” Harvey pressed. “You are so much stronger than that...that *thing.* And I would have kept fighting it until you did. I told you, back in the Cavern, I have faith in you. Always have, always will.”

Charlie went on blinking at the ceiling, and Harvey felt a twinge of unease. “I’m not sure I deserve it,” he said.

“Of course you d—”

“There’s something I didn’t tell you.”

Ah. They’d arrived at the heart of it: the reason, Harvey suspected, that Charlie had been so polite and distant. He willed himself to stay calm, to project acceptance and support. “Okay,” he said. “What is it?”

“I went home with someone.”

“In the Void?”

“Yeah.”

“Were you. Um.” In spite of his best efforts, Harvey’s throat closed around the words. But he could get them out, *had* to get them out. “Did you love him?”

“What?” Charlie finally rolled to face him, eyes wide with shock. “No! I didn’t even sleep with him! I couldn’t—I took him home, but he left, I stopped it. I never saw him again.”

“Then, honey, I don’t—”

“I made out with him,” Charlie blurted, brows drawn together in misery. “I went to bed with him, I was *going* to sleep with him. And I know it wasn’t real, and I couldn’t remember, but *now* I remember everything, and it still feels like it was real, you know? It feels like it all just happened, and like I kind of cheated on you, and now you’re here and I can’t—I want you so bad, V, I’m dying to touch you, but I feel like I don’t *deserve* it, I—”

“Charlie. Darling. Hold on.” Harvey caught his hands, pulling them to his chest. Dimly, he remembered doing this same thing in Skull Cavern, when Charlie was panicking about something very different. Looking back on their relationship, he could understand why this would have eaten away at Charlie, why he would have feared Harvey’s reaction. But in truth, Harvey had expected so, so much worse. Six months *was* a long time; he’d been afraid Charlie had met someone, *really* met someone, not just a one-night stand. Even though, logically, he knew the Beast had tried to keep Charlie as miserable as possible. Who knew how its mind had worked? Charlie had seemed so distant; Harvey had worried he was missing someone. “Sweetheart, listen to me. It doesn’t matter. All right? It was—a dream, more or less. And you didn’t remember me. Even if you *had…”* He trailed off here, meaning what he said, but still not *quite* able to speak those words. “Even if you had, I wouldn’t be angry.”

Charlie swallowed hard. “You wouldn’t?”

“With the Beast. Not with you.” He pressed a kiss to Charlie’s knuckles, still clutching his hands tight. “It breaks my heart to think of you so sad and alone. If you had...found something to take your mind off it, for a little while, I wouldn’t be upset.”

Harvey couldn’t read the look on Charlie’s face, but his eyes looked damp in the dim light. “Now I know I don’t deserve you,” he whispered. “How could anyone?”

“Char—”

“I knew you would forgive me. I always knew. I just...it’s all jumbled up in my brain. How could I just forget? I can’t forgive *myself.”*

Harvey knew a thing or two about guilt; it was a subject he was intimately acquainted with. He knew that it wasn’t always a simple matter of who had wronged and who had *been* wronged. Sometimes, the guilt floated around out there in empty space, a life sentence for a crime that had never hurt anyone but the perpetrator. Harvey didn’t need to forgive Charlie, because Charlie hadn’t done anything requiring forgiveness. But Harvey also knew: penance wasn’t always for the benefit of the wronged party. He remembered folding himself over Charlie’s body a year and a half ago, offering himself up in an effort to compensate for his perceived shortcomings. It hadn’t made him feel better, but maybe it would have, if he’d talked to Charlie instead of keeping his fears to himself.

He also remembered the way Charlie had reacted to that woman flirting with Harvey at the Fair. How he’d pushed Harvey around, fucked him, *possessed* him. And even though there had never been a real danger, even though it was all for show, Harvey had felt so much afterward: so cherished, so loved, so fiercely glad to be Charlie’s. He had felt, for one of the the first times in his life, like a treasure—something to be kept close and never let go.

Harvey didn’t need Charlie’s atonement. But Charlie needed to feel that he’d atoned, all the same.

“You’re right,” Harvey said, and Charlie’s brow furrowed in concern. “How *could* you forget that you’re mine?”

A flash of hurt crossed Charlie’s face. “I didn’t mean to, I told you, it was—”

“I think,” Harvey spoke over him, hoping desperately this was the right call, “it’s my fault. I clearly haven’t reminded you enough.”

To his intense relief, the hurt on Charlie’s face melted away. *“Oh,”* he breathed.

“You tell me, Charlie. Do you need a reminder?”

“Yes,” Charlie whispered, “yes, *please—”*

Before the last consonant had left his mouth, Harvey slid his hand up the back of Charlie’s head, pulling him into a bruising kiss. Charlie’s gasp was swallowed up into it, his whole body going pliant and loose-limbed at once. Harvey felt two conflicting things: the desire to lose himself in the sensation of their bodies moving together, and the weight of responsibility

in guiding Charlie through this. He had to walk a fine line, dominant and possessive enough to help Charlie find his way back, gentle enough not to hurt him or make his guilt worse. Charlie trusted him, and he valued that trust more than anything else in the world.

Mid-kiss, he tightened his fist in Charlie's hair, yanking his head back to expose his throat. Charlie's breathing quickened like a prey animal, and he went iron-hard against Harvey's hip. The knowledge of his arousal went a long way toward easing Harvey's worries, but still: better safe than sorry. He brushed his mouth against Charlie's ear, setting his teeth against the edge in just a hint of danger.

"You want this?"

"God, Harvey, *yes."*

"You want it rough?"

"Yes!" Charlie writhed, trying to turn his head, but Harvey kept his grip. He slid his other hand up Charlie's neck; his pulse jumped as though his heart would beat through his skin.

"And if it's too much," he pressed, because they had to establish this, no matter how badly Charlie wanted it, "if you decide you don't want it—"

"I'll tell you to stop," Charlie panted, rolling his eyes sideways to meet Harvey's gaze. "I promise, I will, you won't hurt me—"

With this, Harvey ducked down, pressing his open mouth to Charlie's bared throat. He kissed the hot skin there for a moment; then, when Charlie seemed to relax a little, he sucked hard and bit down just enough. Charlie let out a sharp hiss, his hands coming up to the back of Harvey's head. When Harvey pulled back to survey the results, there was a livid red mark standing out against Charlie's skin.

"That's going to bruise," he said, doing his best to keep his voice low and rough, the way he knew Charlie liked it. "Everyone's going to see it, and they're going to know."

"Gah! Know—what?" Charlie managed, and even though it was perfectly obvious, Harvey understood what he wanted to hear.

"Know that I fucked you," he growled, rolling his hips against Charlie's thigh, grinding into him. Charlie let out a low whine in response. "Know you're *mine."*

"Jesus," Charlie said breathlessly. Harvey tugged his head forward, forcing him to meet his eyes.

"Say it," he demanded. Charlie's gaze was wild, pupils blown wide in the moonlight. Harvey thought he could get drunk on that attention, that intoxicating focus.

"Yours, I'm yours—"

"Who gets to touch you?"

“You!”

“That’s right.” He reached for the waistband of Charlie’s boxers, thankful that his husband liked to sleep without a shirt on; there were enough clothes in the way already. With a sharp tug, he got them down below Charlie’s balls; Charlie whimpered, canting his hips forward. “Only me. No one else.”

“No one,” Charlie agreed incoherently, still trying in vain to get Harvey to touch his dick. “Baby, please—”

“Everyone looks at you. How could they not?” Harvey’s eyes roamed over him, his disheveled hair, his flushed skin, his lean muscles. *Beautiful.* Based on the way Charlie’s cock twitched, he thought he was onto something. Leaning down, he put his mouth near Charlie’s ear again, making sure to drag his rough stubble over the sensitive skin under his jaw. “Do you want to know a secret?”

“Fuck, *yes—”*

“I love knowing that everyone looks at you,” Harvey breathed, and Charlie let out a long, broken noise. “That everyone wants you, but only I get to have you. Only I get to do...this.” He reached down and took Charlie in hand, and Charlie swore so loudly that Harvey almost broke character and laughed.

“Do you like that?”

“Gah,” Charlie said again, thrusting into Harvey’s fist, and he supposed that was a good enough answer. The trick with this, Harvey was beginning to realize, was not to let himself think too much. If he did, if he paused to actually examine what he was saying, the self-consciousness threatened to overwhelm him. But if he just let it flow—out of that inexplicable place deep inside him, the place where he stored words like *take it, Charlie, take my cock* and *I need you to fuck me* —it felt natural, not embarrassing at all.

Charlie’s own fingers had crept under Harvey’s T-shirt and into his pants, wrapping around his dick through his underwear. It felt so good, *so good,* and he couldn’t let Charlie do it, not yet, because if he let himself give in this early he was going to forget what he was doing. He took his hand off Charlie’s erection, snatching his wrist away; Charlie moaned disconsolately.

“I didn’t tell you to do that,” Harvey growled.

Charlie smirked, just a little. “I couldn’t resist.”

While that facial expression always *did* things to Harvey, it didn’t belong here, in this scenario they were building where Harvey gave the orders. He released Charlie’s wrist and got up from the bed, slowly, never taking his eyes off Charlie. The smirk fell off his face instantly; his brow furrowed in confusion.

“What are you—”

“If you really can’t resist,” Harvey said calmly, reaching into the top drawer of their dresser, “I’ll have to help you.” He pulled out a necktie (randomly chosen, which turned out to be the black one he’d worn on their first date), holding it in front of him with both hands. He gave Charlie time to register it, to understand what he was saying; Charlie’s eyes widened, and the pink flush of his skin spread even further. “Or will I?”

“Yes,” Charlie whispered, chest heaving, “yes, you will.”

Permission granted, Harvey climbed back onto the bed, straddling Charlie’s midsection. He grabbed his wrists in one hand, just a *little* roughly, and pinned them against the headboard; with a few quick movements, he tied them to a spindle. Harvey wasn’t well-versed in the field of bondage, but he thought he’d done an OK job with the knot, leaving it loose enough that Charlie could escape if he wanted to. Glancing down at his husband, who stared fixedly at Harvey’s tented pajama pants eight inches away, he thought it very unlikely that Charlie wanted to go anywhere.

“Now that that’s settled,” Harvey said, drawing Charlie’s attention back up to his face. He made quick work of stripping them both, tossing his own pajamas and Charlie’s boxers into a careless pile on the floor. When he resumed his position, knees on either side of Charlie’s torso, he was struck with sudden inspiration; he shoved a pillow behind Charlie’s shoulders, propping him up where he wanted him. Charlie’s eyes were riveted on his face, dark and hungry. Harvey reached down to trace along his jaw, and Charlie leaned into the touch, shivering.

“If you want me to stop,” Harvey whispered, “close your eyes, okay?”

In response, Charlie opened his mouth, still staring up at him. Harvey felt himself go even harder. How he had found a husband who was so endlessly enthusiastic about giving blow jobs, he would never know, but he was grateful for it every day. He slid his hand from Charlie’s jaw to the back of his head; then, he thrust his hips forward, burying his cock in Charlie’s waiting mouth. Yoba, that was divine, the wet heat completely enveloping him and a broken moan issuing from Charlie’s throat. He was careful not to thrust as far as he normally would have—without Charlie’s hands to help control his depth, he was afraid of choking him—but it still felt incredible, as it always had. He tightened his fingers in Charlie’s hair, picking up speed, loving the sounds that escaped him.

When he heard Charlie breathing hard through his nose, he pulled back to give him a break. Charlie panted, working to catch his breath, but he wore a satisfied look on his face. “Look at you,” Harvey said, tilting his chin up to examine his swollen lips. “You’re perfect. I knew, the first time I saw you like this. I knew I couldn’t let anyone else see you like this again. I had to keep you all to myself.”

“Jesus Christ, Harvey,” Charlie said breathlessly, hoarsely. “Keep talking. *Please.”*

“Do you really want me to keep talking?” he asked, arching an eyebrow. “Or do you want me to do something else with my mouth?”

“Oh my god, yes, *that.”*

He found himself sprawled across the bed on his stomach, Charlie's thighs rising on either side of his bobbing head, two slick fingers buried inside him. Charlie's flat abs tightened and tensed as Harvey sucked him, his arms straining against his bonds. Harvey glanced up to make sure he was all right, and saw that his husband's hands were wrapped around the spindle, holding himself in place. He didn't want to escape, he *wanted* to be tied up and pinned down and used, and the wave of lust that went through Harvey was so dizzying he almost forgot the reason they were doing this.

But *Yoba,* he loved it. Charlie was so responsive, so eager, so ludicrously hot. Sometimes, Harvey thought he himself could almost come just from sucking Charlie off. When Harvey found his prostate, Charlie let out a keening whine, bracing his feet against the bed. His cock went impossibly harder in Harvey's mouth, his balls drawing up, and Harvey realized he was quickly approaching the point of no return. He pulled off, wrapping a hand around Charlie's cock and squeezing gently, stilling his fingers inside him. Charlie's eyes found his, brows drawn together, silently pleading.

"Not yet," Harvey said, gently but firmly. "I've got other plans for you."

Charlie took a deep breath and blew it back out, getting himself back under control. "Okay," he said at last. "Okay."

"Perfect," Harvey praised him again, and got to his knees.

He'd never tied Charlie up before, and while he didn't think it was anything he'd particularly make a habit of, he had to admit the appeal: as he knelt between his husband's legs, hitching his hips into his lap, all of Charlie's weight was suspended between his elevated hips and his bound hands. The tanned, muscular arch of his body was taut as a bowstring. Harvey felt his breath catch, tracing his gaze from Charlie's bobbing Adam's apple to his straining cock. Even after all this time, he couldn't believe such a gorgeous man had chosen *him.* He would never get tired of looking at Charlie, not if they both lived to be over a hundred.

But he could save his staring for another time; Charlie had waited long enough. Harvey shifted, fingers digging into his husband's hips, and buried himself inside his body. Charlie flung his head back, curls dangling toward the bed, and gasped. Harvey could feel his insides clenching around him, getting used to the intrusion, and waited until they had begun to relax. When Charlie lifted his head again, looking hazily down his body at the point where they joined, Harvey took it as a sign that he was ready for more.

If they'd had neighbors, Harvey was sure they would have heard them. The sounds of his hips meeting Charlie's ass, over and over, were obscene enough—but Charlie himself seemed intent on shouting it to the entire village. Harvey almost worried he was hurting him, but when he voiced that question, Charlie shook his head so hard he nearly dislodged his hands from their bindings.

"No, it's—it's so good, don't stop, baby, *please—"*

Harvey knew it was ridiculous to be so turned on whenever Charlie called him *baby.* He was a forty-year-old man with the beginnings of a beard; it seemed like a term better reserved for svelte nineteen-year-olds. Philip had called him that once or twice, and he'd never felt

anything about it except mild annoyance. And yet, every time Charlie said it, he felt desired, *desirable,* even. Just one of the many mysteries of Charlie's power over him, he supposed. He doubled his efforts, gripping his husband's hips hard enough to bruise, pulling out nearly all the way on each stroke and slamming back in with all the force he dared. *Fuck,* he felt incredible, as incredible as he looked, and *that* was saying something. There was something ever so slightly off about the whole thing, Harvey could sense it in the back of his mind, but it was so good—he was getting close—

The realization hit him as he felt the tension building, the nerves in his abdomen lighting up and coiling like springs. He didn't want to come like this for their first time back, pounding away at Charlie with his hands tied, playacting at domination. *That* was what felt off. He wanted sweetness, gentleness, Charlie's arms around him. Looking down at Charlie, he saw his face screwed up, eyes shut tight and mouth open, and knew what he needed to do.

He slowed his pace with a monumental effort, taking deep breaths to pull himself back from the edge, and finally came to a stop; Charlie opened one eye, then the other, his brow furrowing. "What's wrong?" He made little hitching motions with his hips, trying to urge Harvey on.

"Nothing," Harvey murmured, tracing the backs of his fingers down Charlie's sweaty cheek. "Nothing at all, but I want you to do something else for me."

"Anything," Charlie promised, "anything you want—"

"I want you to listen." Charlie looked puzzled, and Harvey leaned in to kiss him, cupping his face in both hands. When he drew back, it was only far enough to speak, their bodies still connected. "Charlie. I love you so much."

"I love you too," he whispered.

"I know that." Harvey gave him a quick smile, hoping to reassure him. "What I mean is, I love *you,* exactly as you are. You're perfect for me, you're amazing, you're a miracle. You changed my whole life, you know that?"

Charlie's gaze darted nervously away, his body going tense. "V, this—this doesn't really work with the, the whole dominant thing—"

"No," he agreed gently. "I'm not playing anymore, my love." He pulled out as delicately as possible, reached up to tug the knot loose around Charlie's wrists, and caught his hands as they fell away; he lowered them to the bed, rubbing the feeling back into Charlie's arms. "I'm not ordering you to listen to me. Okay? I'm asking if you will, because I want to tell you."

Charlie looked at him, his mouth set in a trembling line. Harvey worried he might say no, and prepared himself to let him up—but at last, he gave a single, small nod. Harvey kept working at his muscles, tracing his hands up Charlie's biceps and into his shoulders as he spoke.

"I wish I knew magic. I wish I could let you read my mind, because then you could see for yourself. That you don't have anything to be sorry for, that I'm so proud of you, so grateful for you. That I never thought I could be this happy, not in a million years." He ran his hands

down to Charlie's wrists, lifting them, pressing kisses where the tie had dug into them. When he spoke, it was murmured against his skin. "I have never been sure of anyone's love, my whole life. I never thought I was good enough, always doubted myself. But you." He met Charlie's gaze, smiling, letting all the tenderness he felt flow into it. "You never let me doubt. With you, I always knew."

A tear spilled over onto Charlie's cheek, and he bit his lip. "Harvey."

"I'd ask if it was the same for you, but it is, isn't it? That's why the Beast couldn't keep you. You knew, deep down, you remembered. That we were meant for each other."

Charlie sniffled, tears falling freely now. Harvey reached up to brush them away. "Yeah," he whispered thickly. "Yes."

"Then, sunflower, you shouldn't be sorry. You should be *proud.* Don't you see what a marvel you are? That thing was strong enough to kill a forest a hundred miles away, but it had nothing on you." He leaned forward, pressing his lips to Charlie's forehead, lingering there with his nose buried in auburn curls. "You don't need me to forgive you, sweetheart. You only need to forgive yourself."

At this, the dam broke. Charlie buried his face in Harvey's shoulder, his arms coming around his back, and cried. Harvey held him, making soothing noises and feeling every sob as though it were his own. He desperately hoped he'd done the right thing; he knew it would have been easier for Charlie to keep going, to ignore everything else and focus on the way their bodies moved together, but it had felt wrong to Harvey. He'd wanted Charlie to know, to understand, to *believe.* He pressed his stubbly cheek against the top of Charlie's head, wishing he could see his face and guess at what he was feeling.

It took time—in the semidarkness, Harvey wasn't sure how much—but Charlie eventually subsided. He pulled back, sniffling and wiping his hands over his teary face. Harvey reached over, found his own discarded T-shirt, and offered it to Charlie. He took it, hesitating.

"You really don't mind?"

"It's going in the laundry anyway."

Charlie wiped his face, blew his nose, and tossed the shirt away again. His eyes were red-rimmed and still damp, but Harvey could sense something different in them, something he hadn't seen since their return. When he glanced up at Harvey again, the weight on him seemed to have eased a tiny bit. Relief flooded through Harvey's veins.

"I told you I was bad at pep talks," Harvey reminded him, and Charlie laughed wetly.

"You're amazing at pep talks. The best." He reached up to cradle Harvey's jaw in his hands, nails scratching through the growth of beard there. "Thank you."

"It was just the truth."

"Not just for that. For all of it. For loving me."

“I’m only human, Charlie,” Harvey murmured, smiling. “How could I not?”

Charlie returned his smile at last, wobbly but genuine. “I needed that, I guess,” he sniffed. “Sorry to totally fall apart. Not exactly a turn-on.”

Harvey raised an eyebrow, twitching his hips forward minutely. He’d stayed nestled between Charlie’s thighs throughout the whole thing, and while his arousal had flagged a bit, it had never entirely gone away. “Do I feel turned off to you?”

Charlie’s shocked giggle was music to Harvey’s ears. “Seriously? You’ve got a thing for weepy messes?”

“I’ve got a thing for *you.* But only if you want to.”

“I want to,” Charlie assured him, tracing hands down his sides. “I always want to.”

Harvey kissed him, soft and sweet, the way that had always felt the most natural to him. “Then show me what you want,” he murmured.

They wound up spooning, Harvey’s body pressed tight against Charlie’s back. With one arm, he held Charlie’s hips in place; the other, he wrapped around his husband’s chest. Charlie clutched at the hand over his heart with both of his own, twining their fingers together messily. Harvey had loved fucking Charlie hard, taking what he needed, but it couldn’t hold a candle to this: Charlie’s starry gaze peering over his shoulder at him, heavy-lidded with adoration; Charlie’s hips rolling with him, welcoming him in, drawing him in deep. He thought back to his own earlier words, about them being meant for each other. Harvey had never believed in fate, or divine plans, or even Yoba, really. But looking into Charlie’s beloved face, he could see the path that stretched throughout his entire lonely life, from his loveless childhood to his empty clinic apartment, and he felt a fierce gratitude for all of it. Every wretched holiday spent at boarding school, every night waiting for Philip to come home, every evening listening to jazz alone and wishing he had someone to dance with: it had all been worth it. Because it had made him stronger, of course, there was an element of that. But most of all, it had brought him here—and taught him to see what a treasure Charlie was, to recognize the real thing when he’d found it at last.

“You’re mine,” Harvey murmured, echoing his earlier declaration. Charlie was facing away from him, but Harvey could make out the edge of his smile as he tightened his grip on Harvey’s hands.

“Yours,” he agreed.

“But that’s not all,” Harvey prompted him. Charlie turned his head, silently questioning; Harvey gazed back, letting all he felt show on his face. At last, he saw the gears turn over in Charlie’s mind, and his smile softened.

“You’re mine, too,” Charlie said, and Harvey let his eyes fall shut in satisfaction.

“Who gets to touch me?”

“I do.”

“That’s right. Only you.” He pressed his lips hard to the top of Charlie’s shoulder, speaking against his skin. “No one else.”

Harvey felt Charlie’s hips stutter a little, breaking their rhythm. “Fuck, V—can you, will you please—”

“I’ve got you.” He wrapped a hand around Charlie’s cock, prompting a moan of relief from Charlie. With each roll of his hips, he pushed Charlie forward into his fist, and Charlie’s fingers clutched almost painfully tight around Harvey’s other hand.

“Ah—god—I’m gonna—”

“Come for me, beautiful, let me see you, that’s it—”

Charlie came, messily, beautifully. He cried Harvey’s name and flung his head back against his shoulder. The combination of that sound and Charlie’s body clenching around him sent Harvey over the edge seconds later; he’d been so focused on Charlie, he hadn’t even realized he was close himself. Pulling Charlie’s body tight against him, he filled him up, hips rutting shallowly as he shouted his release.

When it was over, they lay panting in the same position, both reluctant to separate. Harvey knew he would have to pull out of Charlie at some point, but for now he was exactly where he wanted to be. And Charlie didn’t seem in any rush for him to move, either; he shifted a little, getting more comfortable, and let out a long sigh.

“God,” Charlie whispered, tilting his head back against Harvey’s chest, “it feels so good to touch you, V, it’s been so long. Or, I mean—not really, I know, but...”

“It counts. Anyway, it’s only been a few weeks for me, and I had still missed it.”

“I’m sorry I kept my distance.”

“Don’t be sorry.” Harvey kissed his shoulder again, lingering. “We found our way back here eventually.”

“Yeah.” Charlie traced idle patterns over the back of Harvey’s hand, his heartbeat slowing under Harvey’s fingertips. A thought occurred to him, something he had been wondering since their return, but hadn’t wanted to bring up while Charlie was hurting.

“I keep wondering something. About the Beast.”

“Okay,” Charlie said, and while there was a wariness to his voice, he didn’t sound upset.

“If it was controlling everything you saw in there, and it could read your mind, why show you the hot-air balloon? It seems awfully risky, if the Beast knew what it meant for you.”

Charlie was quiet for a moment. “I’ve been thinking about that. I think...it was trying to remind me of you, just a little, enough to keep me depressed, even though I didn’t know why.

I kept seeing sunflowers all over the place, and hearing jazz music, and it always made me sad. I think the balloon was just another one of those, but…" He looked over his shoulder then, meeting Harvey's eye with a fierce little smile. "It underestimated how much I love you," he said. "It thought I wouldn't remember, but nothing could have made me forget that."

Harvey felt speechless at this, and stared into Charlie's eyes for a long moment. He still found it hard to believe, sometimes, that he had inspired this kind of passion in someone like Charlie. Floundering for something meaningful to say, he landed on the inadequate, "Well, it really messed up, then."

"Massively," Charlie said, yawning and settling his head back on the pillow. "Last mistake it ever made."

Chapter End Notes

That Harvey. He really is good at pep talks. (The beard helps, probably.)

A quick note here: I'll be posting the last regular chapter tomorrow (sob!), but I decided I couldn't let go quite yet, so I've been working on an epilogue set a bit later. I'm HOPING to have it wrapped up tomorrow so I can post it on Tuesday on the regular schedule, but if I can't, I will get it out ASAP. The story doesn't need it to be complete, so don't worry, I'm not going to end on another cliffhanger or anything! Just wanted to check in with our boys one last time.

Tomorrow: the boys return home from an anniversary trip to find a suspiciously high number of messages on their answering machine.

Chapter 39: Summer, Year 4

Chapter Summary

Charlie and Harvey come home from vacation. Someone else comes home, too.

Chapter Notes

In case you missed yesterday's end notes, I'm writing an epilogue, and increasing the chapter count by one! This is the last regular chapter, and I will do my best to get the epilogue out almost on schedule. It almost certainly won't go up tomorrow, but within the next few days (it's 2/3 written)!

No content warnings for this chapter. Just fluff, and a lot of happy crying. Enjoy!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“No sunburn this time,” Charlie declared triumphantly, tossing his shirt in the vague direction of the laundry basket. Harvey hummed in acknowledgement, smiling as he came up behind him in the mirror.

“You learned your lesson on our honeymoon, hm?”

“The sun and I have reached an understanding.” He leaned back into Harvey’s embrace, closing his eyes as his husband’s arms slipped around his middle. Harvey was warm, and surprisingly comfortable for such a beanpole, and maybe Charlie could just…

Those arms gave him a little shake. “Come on, sunflower. Bedtime. You don’t want to sleep on your feet like a horse.”

“Rude,” Charlie mumbled, but allowed himself to be led to bed.

They’d spent a beautiful, nearly perfect week in the Fern Islands for their second wedding anniversary. Still too accustomed to interruptions and surprises, Charlie had been almost afraid to plan for it. But the months since Skull Cavern had passed mostly without incident; only two surprises had been dropped on them during that time. First, they’d left their house in the late fall to find a towering, cylindrical structure behind the chicken coop, which Charlie was absolutely certain had not been there before. A small, wrapped package sat on the ground in front of it, and Charlie had reached down to pick it up. When he’d straightened again, Harvey had vanished. Before his panic could get the better of him, he’d read the note attached to the package, which had very firmly instructed him to touch the obelisk *only while*

carrying the object inside the package. It had turned out to be a small leather pouch, containing a handful of carved wooden totems. When Charlie had touched the obelisk, he'd been immediately whisked to the Calico Desert, where he'd found his thoroughly startled and bewildered husband. The wooden totems, they discovered, would bring them back home; it seemed that Rasmodius had made good on his promise to set up a portal for them, after all. Weekends at the Oasis had become a common occurrence, and they'd even persuaded Qi to let them bring Bones along.

The second surprise had been less *surprising,* but no less welcome. Shane and Maru had appeared on their doorstep a week before Winter Star, announcing that they would be staying in town through Shane's winter break—and that Maru would be starting her own studies in the spring semester. Harvey had been happy to lend them the apartment above the clinic for their stay, though once or twice they'd all stayed up too late talking and ended up putting Shane and Maru up on the couch. For Charlie, who had anticipated being bored to tears all winter without mining to occupy his time, it was the best Winter Star gift he could have hoped for.

In short, their life had become—to quote Rasmodius—mundane. It was utterly ordinary, and Charlie absolutely loved it. They farmed, took care of animals, made dinner, danced, had sex, celebrated holidays, celebrated birthdays, celebrated every day. Nobody tried to kill either one of them, except Pizza. The western cornfield became a cornfield again. And if one or the other of them sometimes went upstairs and sat on the toddler bed, thinking there was only one way they could possibly be happier, well. A ninety-nine percent perfect life was much, much more than most people got. They could be patient, and if it never happened, they could be very happy all the same.

The night they'd returned from their anniversary trip and examined Charlie's lack of sunburn, they'd made a beeline for the bedroom, exhausted from traveling. They didn't bother to unpack, check their mail, or anything else; it could wait until the morning. Overexcited by their return, Bones stretched out between them in the bed, falling asleep blissfully to two hands scratching through his belly fur. And that was the last thing Charlie consciously remembered, before the smell of coffee woke him up the next morning.

"Here's yours, sunflower," a voice was saying to him, and he loved the voice, but it was too early for it to be talking. "Rise and shine."

"Hnghhhhhhhhhhhrly," Charlie said into his pillow. Long fingers stroked through his hair.

"I know it's early, but you asked me to make you get up now so you could get caught up from vacation. Remember?"

"Noooooooo."

Harvey laughed, and Charlie felt a kiss against the top of his head, and then the smell of coffee was moving away. "Wait," he groaned, waving a hand over the edge of the bed.

"Coffee's in the kitchen," Harvey called. Charlie lay in bed for a moment longer, contemplating what a cruel man he had married, and then began excavating himself from under the covers.

He ambled into the kitchen once he was dressed and mostly functional, where Harvey sat sifting through the mail. “Anything interesting?” he yawned, heading for the coffee.

“A letter from your mom, for you.”

“Mm.”

“And one for me, telling me to make you write her back.”

Charlie snorted, stirring cream into his coffee. He wasn’t entirely sure the developing alliance between his mother and his husband was going to be a good thing for him. “Did you check the answering machine?”

“Oh, no. I keep forgetting we have it. Let me look.”

Charlie had barely settled himself at the table, coffee in hand, when Harvey let out a low whistle. “Char, come look at this,” he called. “Something must have happened while we were gone.”

When Charlie joined him, peering down at the answering machine, he felt suddenly wide awake. “Hold on, *nine* messages? Nobody ever calls us!”

“And if it was a medical emergency, they would have called us on the island, I posted the number outside the clinic. Let’s see.” He reached for the playback button, but just as he pressed it, the phone rang. Harvey glanced at him, then picked it up.

“Maybe we’ll find out...Hello, Harvey speaking.” Charlie strained his ears, trying to listen in, but all he could make out was a female voice speaking very quickly. Harvey went pale, straightening up suddenly. “Deep breaths, Evelyn, all right? Can you say that again? ...When? Have you moved him? ...Okay. Don’t try to move him, but stay close. I’ll be right there. Of course.”

“What happened?” Charlie called over his shoulder, already dashing away for Harvey’s emergency bag. Harvey pulled his shoes on, tying them hastily.

“George collapsed. She was helping him move from bed to his chair, and he fainted. I’ve got to get over there.”

“The bike, take the bike,” Charlie urged, thrusting the bag into his hand. “Need me to come with you?”

“No, he’s light, I can handle it. I’ll call if we end up transporting him.”

“Okay.” Charlie went on tiptoe to kiss Harvey’s cheek, following him out the door. “Keep me posted, darlin’.”

“I will.” And with that, Harvey threw a leg over the bike and sped down the road.

Charlie had no doubt that Harvey’s role was the harder one—actually having to *do* something, being responsible for people’s well-being—but being a bystander had its own set

of challenges. He kept imagining Evelyn's tear-streaked face, worrying whether this was it for George. It felt unfair; he'd seen the man just eight days ago, and he'd seemed totally normal. Surely there should be some sort of warning, some advance notice? The worrying was going to drive him nuts.

At least he had enough to keep him busy. There was no point going back into the house; anxiety had done for him in seconds what coffee took half an hour to do. He had a barn to muck, chickens to feed, eggs to collect, crops to weed. Sighing, he picked up his backpack and headed off to deal with Pizza. If being mauled by a cranky rooster couldn't keep his mind off things, nothing could.

Charlie had kept an ear out all day, as he bustled from one end of the farm to the other. He'd expected to hear either the reassuring sound of his own bike, returning from George's house with good news, or the more ominous ring of the phone. The sound that eventually interrupted his work, however, was neither: it was the sound of car tires crunching down their gravel drive. As he poked his head out from between the rows of corn, he saw an unfamiliar woman getting out of a sedan. Maybe she was lost?

"Can I help you?" he called, pulling off his gloves as he walked toward her. She shielded her eyes, squinting at him, and glanced down at her phone.

"Charlie?" she called back, to Charlie's surprise. Not lost, then.

"That's me. What can I—"

"Is Dr. Harvey here, as well?"

Kind of rude, but OK. "No, he's on a house call right now." He came to a stop a few feet away from her, hands in his pockets. She didn't *look* sick or injured. "Do you need a doctor?"

"No." She squinted at him again, as though skeptical that he was who he said. "Is your phone working?"

Charlie was beginning to be annoyed by these questions. And he really, *really* wasn't up for another "mysterious message delivered by an unmarked car" thing. "Yes, it is," he said, trying not to sound too testy. "Can I ask who you are?"

"I'm Shannon, from the agency. I've been trying to call you for three days. Do you not check your messages?"

Suddenly, Charlie remembered the answering machine with its judgmental *9* blinking at him. "Oh! The answering machine! I'm sorry, we've been on vacation and got back late last night, and we were going to check it this morning but then Harvey got called out, and—" The first part of Shannon's introduction caught up to him, and comprehension dawned. "Wait. The—you're from the agency? The *adoption* agency? Why have you been…"

He trailed off here, because she had opened the back door of the car, and in it—

“He was surrendered to us two weeks ago. No living parents, next of kin had their own children and felt unprepared to add another.” She extracted the car seat as she spoke, and Charlie was trying to listen, but he could hear his own blood pounding in his ears. *He.* There was a baby in that car seat, under the blanket, and it was a boy. “We had all the standard medical examinations done, and then we tried to call you. It seemed strange that you wouldn’t respond, given how often Dr. Harvey checks in with us.”

Harvey checked in with them? Charlie hadn’t known.

“My colleagues were ready to place him with another family, but Asma—who performed your home visit?—she was adamant that something must be wrong. And I admit, your letter made a very compelling case.”

“Harvey’s a great writer,” Charlie said automatically, still staring at the car seat.

“Not that letter,” she corrected him, and Charlie glanced up at her in confusion. “The one added to your file six months ago. We don’t like to play favorites, but receiving a personal endorsement from our most generous donor—and such a glowing one—well, it does make these kinds of decisions easier.”

“I don’t understand,” Charlie said, feeling about fifteen steps behind. “Donor? Who wrote us an endorsement?”

“You really didn’t know?” That skeptical look was back again. “Mr. Qi. He’s been providing our organization funding for years. He’s quite the philanthropist, you know, donates to a number of causes. And apparently, he thinks the world of you and your husband. I can show you the letter, but let’s go inside first, shall we? He shouldn’t stay out very long in this heat.”

“Okay,” Charlie said, dazed. He walked ahead of her, his mind spinning. Qi was an actual philanthropist, not full of shit after all, and he had written them a letter of recommendation. How had he even known they were registered with that agency? There was a baby coming into his house, and—maybe it was going to be *their* baby? For the second time that day, he felt knocked completely off-kilter. There hadn’t been any warning, he hadn’t expected it, Harvey, where was Harvey, he should be here—

But Shannon was placing the car seat on the table, and pulling back the blanket, and there he was: a baby, just waking up. Charlie supposed he should feel something earth-shattering, some surge of paternal instinct, but none of that happened. It was just a baby, not a wrinkly newborn but clearly not more than a month or two old. He had light olive skin, a tiny patch of dark hair above his forehead, pink cheeks, balled fists. He was tiny, and so, *so* fragile-looking. Charlie swallowed hard, unaccountably panicked. He’d wanted this, they’d both wanted this, why was he so terrified?

“Here he is,” she announced unnecessarily, leaning down to smooth the baby’s hair. “Six weeks old.” She turned to smile at Charlie, her frosty demeanor thawing a little in the baby’s presence. “Would you like to hold him?”

No. Was she crazy? Charlie would obviously break him. “I. Um. Harvey’s on a house call,” he said feebly. “He should—he should be here—”

“Listen,” she said, sighing. “I know it feels sudden, and it’s scary. I have kids myself; it’s *always* scary. But the fact is, there’s a long list of families waiting to adopt a baby, and there’s a healthy baby boy who needs a home. You don’t have to take him if you’re not ready, but you two will need to make the call quickly.” She unbuckled the baby, who was beginning to fret a little, and made cooing noises at him. Once she had lifted him up, she approached Charlie, gesturing at him with her elbow.

“Put your arms up, like this. A little bit higher. Good. Now just keep them there.” Before he knew what was happening, she was depositing the baby into his arms, carefully settling his head into the crook of Charlie’s elbow. She stepped back, and Charlie almost followed her. *Danger, danger, definitely going to break him,* his brain chanted, but he did his best to swallow his panic. He looked up at her, unsure of what to say.

“You two take a moment to get acquainted. May I use your restroom?”

“Oh, um, of course. It’s...over there.”

Babies were surprisingly heavy, it turned out. He knew the baby couldn’t weigh that much, but the way you had to hold your arms, it was more tiring than he’d expected. A fresh wave of fear broke over him. He didn’t know *anything* about babies. Harvey had bought a book, and Charlie had read it, but that had been almost two years ago. And yeah, there was a crib upstairs, but they didn’t have formula, or diapers, or—or *anything,* how could they do this? Charlie had fought a literal giant monster, but this, this was a whole new level of scary. He gazed down at that tiny face, the brown eyes blinking sleepily, and wondered how he was going to break it to Harvey that he was too much of a wuss to raise a child.

The front door opened; Charlie had been too lost in thought to hear the footsteps on the porch. “Honey?” Harvey called, and Charlie almost fainted from relief. “Whose car is that?”

“It’s, um...kind of hard to explain?”

Harvey came into the kitchen, a wary look on his face. Charlie supposed he had expected the Mr. Qi Men in Black treatment again, too. But when he saw what was happening—Charlie standing in the middle of the room, a baby in his arms, a car seat on the table—he froze in his tracks. He stared at the baby as though he’d never seen one before.

“Is that.” His voice came out raspy and faltering; he tried again. “Um. Who, who is…”

“He’s—I don’t think he has a name yet,” Charlie said stupidly, as though Harvey had been asking for an introduction. “He’s six weeks old. The—the agency lady brought him.”

“ The *agency,”* Harvey breathed. The medical bag thumped out of his slack hand to the floor, and he met Charlie’s gaze, eyes round. “Charlie, tell me, please, is he…?”

Ah. It all made sense again. This, *this* was why Charlie had thought they could do this. Because no matter how scary it was—and it was still really fucking scary—it had made Harvey look at him like that. Like he was holding his breath with longing, like Charlie had the key to unlocking the one last thing he’d ever wanted. Charlie knew, really knew, that Harvey would live the rest of his life just the two of them, if it was what Charlie wanted. But

just as fervently, Charlie knew that he would do literally anything to make his husband happy. Charlie was an adaptable guy; he knew he would find his way to the whole fatherhood thing, eventually. But Harvey was already there, and of course, of *course* there was only one answer.

"He's, um, ours," Charlie managed, his own voice a little hoarse. "If we want him to be."

One long, shaking hand came up to cover Harvey's mouth then, and his eyes brimmed with tears. Charlie wanted to hold him, but he was already holding someone, so he settled for stepping into Harvey's space. Harvey leaned in to look at the baby more closely, an expression of wonder on his face. His free hand hovered an inch from the baby's head, as though if he touched him it might all turn out to have been an illusion. Charlie wanted to say something, but he had no idea what. Should he comfort him? Congratulate him? He felt every emotion at once: fear, excitement, relief, all covered with a thick layer of unreality. He'd always thought nine months was a crazy amount of time to have to carry a child, but maybe it took that long for it to sink in.

"You can touch him," Charlie finally said, with his best attempt at a smile. "He's not quite as breakable as I thought."

Harvey glanced at him, briefly, and then he settled his hand over the curve of the baby's head. He stroked his thumb back and forth, gently; the baby let out a soft cooing sound, waving one fist in the air. A tear spilled over on Harvey's cheek, and Charlie felt something squeeze in his chest. He didn't know if it was a happy ache for having gotten here, or a sad one for how long Harvey had been waiting for this. He suspected it was both.

"Say something, darlin'," he whispered, nudging Harvey's arm with his elbow. "Are you happy, or…?"

Harvey let out a watery laugh, then, meeting Charlie's gaze again. "I'm—yes, I—I don't know what I am. I'm overwhelmed. Is this real, Char? Does—someone wants to give us a baby?"

"She said his parents died," Charlie said, feeling a pang of sadness. However happy this baby's future could be, there was some trauma in his past. They'd have to ask for more details. "The agency picked us for him."

"Dr. Harvey, I'm glad you made it home," called Shannon's voice, and they turned to see her emerging from the bedroom. "Charlie mentioned you were on a house call."

"Oh! God! Is George okay?" Charlie asked, kicking himself for having forgotten. Harvey put a hand on his shoulder, smiling as he sniffled.

"He's fine. It was too warm in their house; the air conditioner wasn't working. Between that and a little dehydration, he just fainted for a moment, but he's all right. I got some fluids into him, and Lewis is working on the A/C right now."

"Thank god." There was *one* worry Charlie could set aside.

“As I mentioned to your husband, I’ve been trying to reach the two of you for some time.”

“The messages,” Harvey said, his eyes darting to the machine. “I’m sorry.”

“He explained you’ve been away, it’s all right.”

“Do you want to hold him, V?” Charlie asked. Harvey looked at him again, just as wide-eyed as he’d been when he first came through the door.

“I—yes, okay,” he said, swallowing audibly. He reached out, but his hands were still shaking; with a little self-deprecating laugh, he moved toward the armchair. “Maybe I’d better sit down for this.”

Placing the baby into Harvey’s arms—even though Charlie was still afraid of breaking him—ranked immediately among the best moments of Charlie’s life. The little warm, solid weight settled against Harvey’s chest, and his arms cradled him automatically, without needing to be told how. He gazed down at the infant, his brows drawn together in what looked like pain. But Charlie had seen that look before. It was the same expression he’d worn at the altar during their wedding; it was the expression of Harvey hardly daring to believe he could be this lucky.

The baby’s face screwed up, and he began to grumble. Harvey looked up, glancing between Shannon and Charlie with a stricken expression. “I don’t know what happened, he just—”

Shannon laughed, heading for the diaper bag on the table. “Don’t worry. You didn’t do anything wrong, he’s just hungry. It’s a long trip out here, for a little guy.” She reached into the side pocket, pulling out a bottle and tilting it back and forth. “Just need to get him fed, and he’ll be fine.”

“Oh, okay,” Harvey said, shifting the baby away from himself with clear reluctance. “Would you like to sit here, or—”

“Or you could feed him,” she said, appearing in front of him with the bottle and a smile. “Up to you.”

“Okay,” Harvey said again, barely above a whisper. He took the bottle, tentatively offering it to the baby; he latched on right away, his squalling forgotten. Harvey looked up again, and the beaming smile on his face made Charlie want to kiss him, agency lady be damned. Instead, he settled for perching on the arm of the chair, putting his arm around Harvey’s shoulders.

It turned out Shannon was a lot friendlier with an explanation for their absence and a well-fed baby. She chatted to them as the baby ate, telling them about the agency, asking about their lives. Charlie answered her questions as honestly as possible, leaving out all the business with the Void Beast and the mines. He fervently hoped all of that was behind them, anyway. Harvey nodded along, occasionally chiming in, but mostly kept his eyes on the baby in his arms. Charlie couldn’t blame him. When you’d wanted something your entire life, it was understandable to be a little distracted when it finally appeared.

As the baby was finishing his meal, Charlie remembered something. “You mentioned that Mr. Qi wrote you a letter,” he said. Harvey looked up in surprise. “Is it possible that we could read it?”

“Oh, right.” Shannon rummaged in the bag again, pulling out a sheaf of paperwork. She extracted a piece of paper from a folder—Charlie had an almost Pavlovian response at seeing Qi’s letterhead again, a jolt of sudden stress—and handed it over. “Mr. Qi’s generosity has kept us up and running through some very difficult times. He’s a true inspiration. We were all so impressed to learn that you two were friends of his. How did you meet him?”

“Um,” Harvey said, still looking bewildered.

“We go way back,” Charlie cut in, giving Harvey a meaningful look. “Hard to say exactly how we met.” Mostly because any sane adoption agent would take the baby and run for the hills if she knew what Charlie and Harvey had gotten up to at Qi’s behest, but best not to split hairs. She seemed to accept this, shuffling through her papers as Charlie and Harvey read.

To my dear friends of the Ferngill Family Connection,

It is my understanding that a certain couple is listed among your families awaiting a child. I believe you received an application, some time ago, from a Mr. Charlie and Dr. Harvey of Pelican Town. When I heard these gentlemen hoped to adopt, I knew I must write you at once. I would not wish to exert any undue influence over the selection process; I know that many worthy families wait for a placement. I hope that, instead, you will simply view this letter as a vote of confidence from a friend—a friend both to you, and to the men in question.

I have had the great privilege of getting to know Harvey and Charlie, and I cannot think of two people better suited to be parents. I hope you will excuse a degree of vagueness in this matter, but without going into great detail as to the circumstances, I can say from personal experience: these two men are possessed of an unassailable moral compass, a bottomless capacity for self-sacrifice, and a rare courage. They are kind, determined, and devoted to the welfare of their fellow man. They are equally devoted to each other; no one who has spent as much time in their company as I have can be in any doubt of that.

Should a child eventually find their way into Charlie and Harvey’s household, I would consider that little one to be exceptionally lucky. For I fully believe he or she would be raised and loved by two of the best, bravest people in the Republic. Should you require any further convincing, feel free to contact me at any time. I would be grateful for the opportunity to repay them, in some small way, for the immeasurable service they have done for me.

I hope you have all been well, and wish you a pleasant holiday season.

Yours sincerely,

Qi

“Wow,” Charlie said, a little hoarsely. Beside him, Harvey stared mutely at the paper, eyes damp again. Charlie cleared his throat, handing the letter back to Shannon. “That’s. That’s really nice.”

“Whatever you did for him, it really made an impression. Don’t worry, I won’t ask,” she said, holding up a hand. “He told us it was a matter of national security.”

“Something like that,” Harvey agreed. Charlie squeezed his shoulder. In Harvey’s lap, the baby stretched and yawned. It was, Charlie thought, one of the cutest yawns he’d ever seen. Maybe even as cute as Bones when he was a puppy. Almost.

Shannon checked her watch. “It’s almost five,” she said. “I need to be getting back; it’s a long drive home.” She stood, looking between the three of them. “You really do make a lovely family. *If* you decide that’s what you want. I know this is a big decision, and it’s all happening quickly. If you’d like, I can take him back with me, and give you a few days to think about it. Let you decide whether this is the right fit.”

Under his hand, Harvey tensed. Charlie met his gaze and saw it all written there: Harvey had already fallen in love. Giving the baby back was going to kill him, just a little bit. He wanted this, badly, but he wasn’t going to say a word without Charlie’s approval. Charlie thought back to what he’d said that night on the picnic blanket, nearly two years ago— *I can live without children, I can’t live without you* —to all that Harvey was willing to give up to make him happy.

Charlie didn’t have to give up *anything* to make Harvey happy. All he had to do was be brave, believe he was capable of this. There was a bedroom upstairs with a crib in it. And Harvey knew how to hold a baby, and how to feed one, and probably how to do infant CPR and a thousand other things—what else did a kid need, really? Just love, and that had never been a problem, for either of them. Charlie had plenty of love to go around; Harvey practically overflowed with it.

On the one hand: a Harvey who gave up yet another of his dreams, who lived the rest of his life just a little bit sadder. On the other: an ecstatic Harvey, a son to raise and nurture, and a new, different future. Uncharted territory, and when had Charlie ever been able to resist *that?*

The math, as it turned out, was easy.

“We don’t need a few days,” Charlie said, not taking his eyes off Harvey. “We’ll do it.”

Harvey’s eyes went round again, and he blinked hard. Charlie felt a tremor under his hand. He stroked through Harvey’s hair, trying to silently transmit to him all that he felt. *I want to do this with you. I’m scared, but I’m ready. I love you, and I know I’ll love him too.*

“Are you sure?” Shannon asked. “If you need time to discuss it, that’s okay.”

“Do we have anything to discuss, V?”

Harvey shook his head minutely. “No,” he whispered, then cleared his throat and turned to Shannon. “No, I mean...Charlie’s right. We want to adopt him.”

“That’s wonderful news.” Shannon beamed at them, hands folded around her paperwork. “I know you two will be wonderful parents. And he’s a very sweet baby; you’re lucky to have each other.” Charlie nodded dumbly, feeling too full of emotion to form words. “Now, as you

might remember from your onboarding process, it *does* take time to finalize an adoption. Certainly it's a faster process under these circumstances, without a birth family, but it'll likely still take several weeks. Some families choose to keep the baby at home, but many prefer the child stay with the agency until things are legally final. Just to make things more comfortable." *Just in case it all falls through and we have to take the baby back and completely wreck you,* she didn't say, but Charlie heard it anyway.

He knew Harvey heard it, too, but he also knew exactly what Harvey was going to say. "No, thank you," Harvey said, polite even through the trembling of his voice. "We'd like to keep him here, with us. If that's...if it's allowed."

"It's allowed." Shannon smiled at him again, and suddenly the reality hit Charlie over the head like a cartoon anvil.

"Wait! Oh, man. We don't have any—I mean, the room is all set up, but we weren't really prepared, we don't have *stuff*. Diapers, formula, that kind of thing." He stood, scrubbing a hand through his hair in agitation. "I can get some ordered, but I don't think we can get it today, it's a really small town and—"

"Whoa, whoa, take a breath! It's okay," she laughed, putting a hand on his arm. "I have all those things in my car, enough for a week or so at least. Let's get the paperwork filled out, and then you and I can bring it in. Sound good?"

"Is there something I can do to help?" Harvey piped up, still cradling the dozing baby in his lap.

"I think you're doing great right there," Shannon said. "I'll need your signature in a few, but until then, you can sit tight."

"Okay," Harvey said, already lost in gazing at the baby again.

The paperwork seemed to take forever—there was almost as much of it as when they'd first applied to adopt—and then there was the rest: trips up and down the stairs with formula and diapers, lectures from Shannon on how to feed him and change him and when he should sleep, a long list of emergency phone numbers, a harried call to Pierre to beg him to please order in diapers and formula, and to please not tell anyone else about it before they could. By the time Shannon finally departed, dropping a kiss on the baby's head as she headed out the door, it was nearing sunset. Harvey had spent most of the time sitting with the baby, except a brief hand-off to Charlie so he could fill out paperwork. Shannon drove away with a wave and a promise to call the next day, and Charlie shut the door behind her, turning around with a long sigh. Harvey sat nestled in the corner of the sofa, the baby in the crook of one arm; with his free hand, he traced a line over the infant's sleeping face. The sight loosened the knot of fear that had lodged itself in Charlie's midsection hours earlier.

"I don't even know what to do now," Charlie said, crossing back to the sofa. "What did we even have planned for today? Unpacking? Making lasagna? Feels like a million years ago." He sat, slinging an arm around Harvey's shoulders, and propped his feet up on the coffee

table. A moment later, he realized Harvey hadn't responded, and looked at him. "V? You okay?"

"She's." Harvey cleared his throat again, noisily, painfully. "She's gone?"

"Shannon? Yeah, I saw her off. It'll take her a while to get home, but she's on her way." He peered closer at Harvey, whose lip was trembling again. "Honey, what's wrong, are you—"

"Is this real?" Harvey whispered, and the shaking had spread to his shoulders. "Charlie, am I dreaming? It's all—it's too good to be true, it's—is he *ours?"*

Charlie's chest did that aching thing again, impossibly happy, impossibly sad, all at once. Harvey's traced down the baby's arm, and in his sleep, he wrapped his tiny hand around Harvey's finger. "Yeah," Charlie murmured. "I mean, there's paperwork and legal stuff, but assuming—yeah, darlin'. He's ours."

At this, Harvey leaned over, put his face against Charlie's shoulder, and completely lost it. He drew in one enormous breath, which came out in a long, muffled sob; his shoulders shook so hard Charlie worried he'd wake the baby, but he slumbered on. Charlie shifted on the couch, both his arms coming around Harvey, and made shushing noises, though he didn't actually expect or want Harvey to stop crying. He understood what it was: a pressure valve releasing, all the hope and agony of the last two years (and probably at least a decade before that) coming out in a single burst. All Charlie could do was put his face in Harvey's hair, whispering nonsense and letting him get it out. He usually tried not to think too much about the weeks after their return from Skull Cavern, all the weird guilt and misery he'd felt, but he remembered doing almost this same thing in reverse back then. He'd felt like a new man afterward; he hoped it would be the same for Harvey now.

Eventually, Harvey's sobs eased, then stopped. Harvey didn't apologize, or seem embarrassed, and Charlie was grateful that his husband trusted him enough to be that vulnerable in front of him. They sat together in silence, Harvey's arms around the baby, Charlie's around Harvey, and just looked at him together. Their life had changed completely in the course of a few hours; what a crazy upheaval, for such a tiny little person.

"I guess we have to come up with a name now," Charlie said with a little laugh. "I hadn't even thought about it yet." Something in Harvey's expression flickered, his cheeks pinkening slightly, and Charlie understood. "But you have, haven't you."

"We don't have to—" he said quickly, and Charlie gave him a little squeeze.

"Let's hear it."

Harvey stroked a reverent, gentle finger over the slight patch of hair on the baby's forehead, seemingly gathering his thoughts. Charlie was struck by how much he already looked like a father; the baby looked perfectly natural in his arms, as though he was meant to be there. "Well," Harvey began slowly, "I was thinking about our life together...about how much things have changed in so short a time. Three years ago I was spending all my time in my apartment, more certain by the day that I'd die alone." He glanced at Charlie, a self-deprecating smile on his lips. Charlie's instinct was, as always, to protect Harvey from his

own harsh assessment, but he could tell he wasn't meant to speak yet. "Two years ago I became a husband, and now I've become a f-father." The tears evidently threatened to overwhelm him again, but he swallowed them back down with visible effort.

"I'm so unbelievably grateful—for you, for this, for everything. And it strikes me that the whole reason you came to the Valley, that you found me and—and brought all this love into my life, is because of one person." He swallowed again and smiled, eyes glittering slightly with unshed tears. "If you're okay with it, I'd like to name him after your grandfather."

There had already been enough crying today; Charlie would *not* add to it, he would not, he could keep it together. He smiled at Harvey, tightly to keep the tears suspended in his eyes, and gave him a squeeze. Harvey seemed to understand, and waited for him to compose himself, leaning his head against Charlie's. The baby stretched and yawned, burrowing in against Harvey's chest, and Charlie felt himself flood with a sudden certainty.

"Simon," he said at last, reaching out to curve his palm around his son's tiny skull. "It's perfect." He turned his watery gaze to Harvey, who beamed back at him with such radiant joy it warmed Charlie to his core. "Thank you," he whispered, and kissed him between the eyes, just above the bridge of his glasses.

They ended up falling asleep like that, both of them sitting up, arms around each other and their son. As Charlie dozed, he let his mind wander off into that uncharted territory, calling up all the moments yet to come. There would be announcements, in short order. They would tell their neighbors, bring him to Marnie's, dress him in a floppy sun hat and take him to the Luau. They'd call Charlie's mother, and maybe the pull of a grandchild would be powerful enough to lure her back to the village at last. They'd introduce him to his godparents, obviously Uncle Shane and Aunt Maru, and maybe they'd ask Evelyn and George to be his honorary grandparents. Charlie would harvest blueberries with Simon strapped to his back; Harvey would hang a mobile above his crib made up of historically-accurate airplanes. There would be costumes on Spirits' Eve and piles of presents on Winter Star, skinned knees bandaged by Dr. Daddy and a tiny voice speaking to pilots on the radio. There would be walks to school with Penny, science fair projects taking over the kitchen table, a jungle gym out by the chicken coop, another little hunter at the Egg Festival. Someday, there would be braces and first crushes and college visits. And through all of it, there would be Harvey beside him: his smile, his warmth, his steady hands, his goodness, his *beard (!),* his deep, fathomless love.

He thought about that word again: mundane. Definitely, by the standards of everything they'd done so far, that was how their future was going to be. Normal, everyday, no more heroism or Tomb Raiding. It was going to be peaceful, simple. Ordinary.

And it was going to be *perfect.*

Chapter End Notes

I have a lot to say, but I'm going to save most of it for the epilogue. For now, I'll just say: thank you so much for reading. Sharing this with all of you has given me so much happiness in what is otherwise a pretty dark time. I may not be back tomorrow with a new chapter, but I will within the next few days, and I'll try to make it worth the wait!

Chapter 40: Fall, Year 27

Chapter Summary

> Visitors arrive for the Stardew Valley Fair. Charlie faces a tough new challenger in the grange competition, to his delight. Wisdom is passed down, dad jokes are told, and a happy life is reflected on.

Chapter Notes

> Thank you all so much for your patience, kindness, and lovely comments. I'm very sorry for the almost two-month wait on this epilogue. The combination of COVID-19 and the police brutality events of the past several months, among other things, have made it difficult to find inspiration to write. On top of that, this ballooned to fifty pages, and then I threw in some artwork for the hell of it. I appreciate you all having given me the time and space to get it done, and I really hope you'll think this little slice of life was worth the wait.
>
> Lots more to say, but I'll save it for the end. For now, let's check in with Charlie and Harvey one last time.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It didn’t happen often, but Charlie had lost the Stardew Valley Fair grange competition once or twice over the years.

There had been that memorable time when Marnie had produced a wheel of cheese the size of a car tire, taking three people to hoist it into her display box. Another, close to a decade later and just before Willy’s retirement, when the old fisherman had caught a fish referred to by local anglers as just “the Legend.” Even Pierre had gotten in on the action twice, the two years after he’d taken a floral arranging class online and stepped up his bouquet game. Charlie was competitive, but he wasn’t a sore loser; his neighbors were always gracious and kind when he won, so he returned the favor. (Even if he pouted about it a little to Harvey in the privacy of their own home.)

So, no, it wasn’t the first time the villagers had seen Charlie lose the grange competition. But the latest loss was remarkable for a different reason. Because this year, Charlie stood up among his neighbors and waited with his heart in his throat. He tapped his foot impatiently, making agonized eye contact with Harvey in the crowd as Lewis rambled to the crowd about the variety of talent found within Pelican Town’s borders. And then, when the announcement was finally made, the top prize was awarded not to Charlie, but to an equally nervous-looking

teenage girl. At which Charlie punched both fists into the air, shouting so loudly it startled birds out of the trees, *"YES!"*

The year Charlie was so happy to lose was his twenty-seventh in the village, and a few things had happened in the intervening decades. When Charlie had first moved to town, the Fair had been a quaint, modest event, befitting the quaint, modest town that hosted it. A farming competition, a handful of carnival games, a petting zoo, a fortune teller; it had attracted a handful of tourists each year, but hardly drawn a crowd.

But as Pelican Town had changed over the years, so had the Fair. The first changes had been small. When Gus had scrounged together enough money to build a patio outside the Stardrop's doors, a beer garden had sprung up on it during the Fair. (Word spread quickly about this, because a certain farm debuted its newest wines there each year.) A few years after that, the abandoned house in Cindersap Forest had been purchased and painstakingly renovated. Its bottom floor was home to the Valley's first veterinary clinic, and a spacious outbuilding—set far enough back in the trees to muffle the noise—held the workshop of an up-and-coming inventor. The year after the first Robot Royale battle was held at the Fair, attendance had doubled.

The school had been a surprise to everyone. As the number of children in Pelican Town had grown, concerned parents had met to discuss possibilities. They could hire more teachers, but without a building, where would they teach? Unexpectedly, a prodigal son had returned to the Valley with a solution. After moving to Zuzu City with Sam and Abigail, Sebastian had finally released his first game—built and distributed totally independently. The runaway success of the title had made him fabulously wealthy, beyond the wildest dreams of anyone in Pelican Town. But five years into city life, he had realized that perhaps the Valley wasn't the prison he had always believed it to be. He had returned home, bringing along Abigail (to her mother's great relief) and leaving Sam to pursue his music career (to *his* mother's great dismay). Older, wiser, and looking for a way to repay the community that had welcomed him back with open arms, he had been only too happy to donate a tiny fraction of his fortune to establish a real school in Pelican Town at last.

Of course, a new school had brought new teachers, which meant new families moving to town. Penny had, with the support of her students' families, gone back to school herself—taking classes from Ferngill University online, she had earned a master's degree and been unanimously appointed principal by the newly-formed school board. She had set about hiring three teachers: Joyce, an older woman, who she hired for her endless patience; Alex, who had finally given up on his professional sports dreams, but who turned out to make an excellent PE teacher; and a shy young man, James, who she hired mostly for his enthusiasm about English, but (if she was honest with herself) also for his dark eyes and wide smiles. Penny and James's own children attended the school when they were old enough, and both parents did their best to avoid favoritism in the classroom. (It mostly worked.)

This wasn't the only educational opportunity in Pelican Town. After years of successful art shows and several published novels, Leah and Elliott had established an artists' residency program. A series of talented young creators shuffled through the beach shack, which had

been left vacant once Elliott had moved in with Leah. Once a year, a whole flock of aspiring artists descended on Pelican Town for a week-long retreat, and their resulting work was displayed at the Fair. The boost to the town's economy had been enough even to satisfy Lewis.

Other changes had naturally followed. When Marlon and Gil had finally hung up their swords, Abigail had bought the Adventurers' Guild from them. She never had lost her lust for danger, although she *had* lost her fear of bats, thankfully. Shane's veterinary clinic needed a nurse, which had brought Barbara to town—a boisterous, friendly widow with a laugh as big as her hair. She had met Gus on her second day in town, asked him out on her fifth, moved in with him on her sixtieth, and married him a year to the day after moving in. No one had so much as batted an eye at the whirlwind romance; it was impossible to imagine two people better suited for each other. And since Barbara's big laugh and big hair were also part of a big family, Gus had become a stepfather to her five adult children—and a few short years later, he'd become Grandpa Gus.

One of Barbara's daughters had moved to Pelican Town to be closer to the grandparents, and she and her wife had opened a bakery in the Square. Joyce's niece had fallen in love with the town, moving into Harvey's old apartment above the clinic and opening a yoga studio in Pierre and Caroline's back room. (Harvey had attended classes several times a week for years now, no longer embarrassed to be taking care of himself.) The Community Center, which Charlie had worked hard to help renovate, now bustled with activity every night of the week. Someone was always teaching a class, or holding a recital, or just bringing food to share with their neighbors. Charlie had always loved Pelican Town, just as it was, but there was no denying it was much more *vibrant* than it had once been. It had walked the seemingly impossible line of growing and changing without losing its heart. He was so, so proud of how far it had come.

Not every change had been easy. He missed Evelyn and George all the time, and frequently stopped by the cemetery to leave flowers (or the occasional cookie). Willy and Linus, too; he still couldn't thread bait onto a fishhook without feeling a little pang. Emily had left town only a year after Simon was born, moving to the Calico Desert after proposing to Sandy. (Charlie and Harvey saw them just as often, though; the Wizard's obelisk had never stopped working.) Sam never had returned to town, staying in the city and developing a small but devoted following around his music. He'd become a father—taking full-time custody of his son, Nathan, after the breakup of his relationship—and once Vincent had gone off to college, Kent and Jodi had moved to the city to be closer to their grandson. Haley had moved overseas to pursue a career as a fashion photographer; Clint had met a woman online and moved to Zuzu City, where he earned a shockingly good living making artisanal knives for local chefs. Jas *had* become a doctor, true to her word, and had stayed in the city afterward—though she at least came back frequently to visit Uncle Shane and Aunt Marnie, bringing her husband and kids with her. (They also visited Aunt Marnie's husband, Richard, an absurdly hot and muscular ranch hand fifteen years her junior who she'd originally hired to replace Shane—and who had fallen head over heels in love with her. Charlie suspected Lewis was still sour about it, but he'd had his chance.)

All of these people—Charlie's neighbors both old and new, their extended families, their network of friends—descended on the Fair every year, along with an increasing stream of

tourists. But one day hardly seemed enough time to play games, watch the grange competition, visit the beer garden and the petting zoo, sample all the food, view the art display, *and* listen to all the music played on the stage Gus and Barbara had built, and so it had expanded to become a weekend-long event around a decade prior. Though it held the least appeal for tourists, the grange competition was still the highlight for the locals. It was a throwback to the older, sleepier days of Pelican Town's history, a tradition that was just for them. And on the day he lost to the beaming, thrilled-looking teenage girl, Charlie had more than one reason to celebrate.

* * * * *

EARLIER THAT DAY

"Farm boy, you have *got* to stop the fucking bouncing. You're giving me a headache."

"He's just excited. I think it's sweet."

"Thank you, Maru. I haven't seen him in six months!"

"We *know.* You never shut up about it. He's a grown man, you have to—"

"There it is!" Charlie grabbed both Maru and Shane by the arms, holding tight to keep himself from running to the train before it had even stopped moving. Maru covered his hand with hers; Shane gave an aggrieved sigh, but didn't pull away. Charlie knew he was almost as excited, just hiding it better. As the train doors opened, Charlie's bouncing intensified to a degree that annoyed even himself. Any moment, he would be stepping onto the platform. Any moment, Charlie would get to see—

"Simon!" he shouted, catching sight of a familiar tall, gangly figure. He broke away from Maru and Shane, crossing the platform in record time. As he reached his son, Simon grinned at him, rolling his eyes good-naturedly and allowing Charlie to fling his arms around him. Simon's hugs always brought a bit of a lump to Charlie's throat; he remembered when they couldn't reach above his knees, and now Simon had to lean down to put his arms around Charlie's shoulders. An average-sized little boy, he'd shot up seemingly overnight in high school until he towered above even Harvey. There had been one memorable year where they'd had to buy him new pants on a monthly basis just to keep his ankles covered.

"Let's have a look at you," Charlie said, holding him at arm's length and glancing him up and down. Simon laughed, clapping him on the shoulder before shrugging out of his grip.

"Dad, I'm twenty-three years old. I don't look different than last time I was here."

"You say that, but parents can always tell." Charlie grinned at him again, just a little watery-eyed. "It's good to see you, kiddo. I missed you!"

"I missed you guys too. Speaking of which…" Simon looked over his head, scanning the platform. "Where's Pops?"

Charlie flapped a hand in the direction of the farm. “Oh, he’s up with Amelia. They’ll meet us in the Square, shouldn’t be long.”

Simon laughed at this, glancing up at the sky. “Seriously, again? Making any progress with the fear of heights?”

“Of course he is,” Charlie declared loyally. Coming up beside him, Maru let out a cough that sounded suspiciously like a laugh. “Okay, maybe not *fast* progress , but you know. It’s coming along.”

“Hey Aunt Maru, Uncle Shane,” Simon greeted their friends, coming forward for a group hug. “Got someone I want you to meet. She’s just waiting for our stuff.”

Truth be told, Charlie had been looking forward to this *almost* as much as seeing his son again. He hadn’t really done the math, but he suspected the breakdown of their phone conversations over the last six months had been about 25% how the tour was going, 10% how Simon himself was doing, 15% how Charlie, Harvey and the farm were doing. And the remaining 50%? Lucia. Charlie had listened to hours of descriptions of how talented Simon’s bandmate was, how smart and funny she was, how she always picked the best restaurants, how she knew everything, how she loved dogs. And as loudly as Simon insisted they were just friends, Charlie only knew his other friends’ names and instruments; he knew Lucia’s hometown, birthday, favorite color, and opinion on cilantro (bad, soapy), among other things.

They made their way down the platform together, unusually crowded today, and as the sea of people thinned out, a young woman came into view. She crouched down in artfully shredded jeans, checking the latches on a guitar case; as she straightened, tossing a waist-length sheet of gleaming blue hair over her shoulder, Simon waved at her. She turned and smiled, and Charlie understood why Simon had been so besotted. Lucia *was* gorgeous, dark eyes and a wide smile peering out from under that navy-blue mane.

“You found someone with longer hair than you,” Maru teased, reaching up to tug a lock that had fallen out of Simon’s haphazard bun. “I’m impressed.”

“I haven’t— *found* anybody,” Simon protested, though his cheeks went flaming pink. “We’re not dating. C’mon, Aunt Maru, I was counting on you to be the cool one.”

Maru turned to Charlie and Shane, grinning delightedly. “The cool one! *Told* you, Shane.”

Simon stepped away to collect Lucia, and Shane rolled his eyes at Maru. “Come on. That kid wouldn’t know cool if it slapped him in the face. Ask Amelia, *she* knows what’s cool.”

“You only say that because you’re her favorite.”

“Case in point.”

“Guys,” Simon said, returning to their little huddle, “this is Lucia, our drummer. Lu, this is my aunt Maru and my uncle Shane. My godparents.” Up close, Lucia was *tall.* Shorter than Harvey, definitely, but significantly taller than Charlie. He felt a sudden gratitude for Maru; at least he didn’t have to look up at *everyone* around here.

“Mr. Shane, Mrs. Maru, I’m so happy to meet you. Simon talks about you all the time.”

“It’s ‘doctor,’ actually,” Shane said, and Maru punched him on the arm.

“Shane! Shut up, nobody cares.”

“Oh, I’m so sorry! *Dr.* Shane.”

“She’s a doctor, too,” he added, jerking a thumb at Maru. Lucia looked across her face at Simon, who pinched the bridge of his nose. (Every time he did that, Charlie marveled at how much he looked like Harvey—despite being three inches taller, olive-skinned and black-haired, and generally not actually looking like Harvey at all.)

“Lu, I know you don’t know them yet, but they’re just messing with you. I’m sorry. I did warn you they were gonna be annoying.”

“You did.” She looked between them, smiling. “And Sy told me what you do for a living, I just forgot who was who. *Are* you actually both doctors, then?”

“Yes, we are,” Maru cut in, before Shane could keep antagonizing her. “He’s a vet, I’ve got a PhD, Harvey’s an MD, we’re all very impressive around here.”

“Except me,” Charlie piped up, deciding they’d had long enough to harass the poor girl. Simon turned to him, looking relieved.

“And this is my dad, Charlie. One of my dads, anyway.”

“Mr. Charlie,” Lucia said, beaming. “I’ve heard so much about you.”

“Just ‘Charlie,’ please. We keep it casual around these parts.” He shot a warning glare at Shane, who rolled his eyes. “We’re so glad you could make it, Lucia. The way Simon talks about you, Harvey and I feel like we know you already.”

“Really,” she said, looking delightedly at Simon. He turned an impressive shade of red again, turning abruptly toward their luggage.

“Okay then! Let’s get our stuff!”

They stashed their bags in the lobby of the clinic. “Sorry we can’t head to the farm right away, kiddo,” Charlie said, locking the front door as they filed back out. “They close the road to cars during the Fair, and it’d be a long walk with all that stuff.”

“It’s fine. The grange judging is happening soon anyway, right? They’d better get down here soon, they’re going to miss—”

“Sy!” shrieked a familiar voice, and Charlie turned to see them approaching: Harvey, grinning and walking with his hands in his pockets, and the short, fast-moving blur of his

daughter. Amelia flung herself at Simon, leaping up to throw her arms around his neck. Simon's face disappeared altogether behind her cloud of curly hair. "You're home!"

"Hey, old sport!" Simon laughed, squeezing her for a long moment. "Did you actually get shorter? How does that happen?"

"Rude! This is supposed to be a *nice moment."*

"Sorry, sorry. You look exactly the same height as always."

To Charlie, it *was* a nice moment. Simon had grown a little reserved as he'd gotten older, but around the irrepressible energy tornado of Amelia, he turned back into a carefree kid. Charlie had been a little concerned that he might put on a show for Lucia—the cool guy, the aspiring rock star, far too worldly and mature for his baby sister—but apparently, his worries had been unfounded. It warmed him to the core, seeing his kids joking together again. Even *old sport* had made a comeback, the teasing nickname the whole family had taken to calling Amelia when she'd become momentarily obsessed with *The Great Gatsby* in middle school.

Charlie had been prepared for another round of introductions; he had *not* been prepared for Amelia to release Simon, turn to a beaming Lucia with her arms wide, and greet her like a long-lost sister. "Luce!" she cried, pulling Lucia into another enormous hug, right as Lucia shouted, "Ames!"

"I can't believe you're here! This is so exciting!"

"I know!"

"Wait," Charlie said, looking between the two of them with dawning suspicion. "You *know* each other?"

"Duh," Amelia pronounced. "We've been emailing back and forth for like a year. And talking on the phone sometimes."

"What the hell!" Charlie protested, rounding on Simon. " *Amelia* gets to talk to Lucia, and we don't? Why not?"

"Because I knew you two would be embarrassing," Simon said, totally unrepentant, while Amelia and Lucia chatted excitably.

"And Amelia's *not* embarrassing?"

"Hey!" Amelia snapped.

"Of course she is," Simon said, earning another bark of protest from his sister. "But she's nineteen. She has an excuse. And there's still hope for her; you guys are *always* gonna be embarrassing."

"I'm not sure he's wrong, sunflower," Harvey murmured, coming up beside him. Charlie scowled, but Simon ignored him, stepping forward and pulling Harvey into a long hug.

“Hi, Pops.”

“My boy,” Harvey said, holding him at arm’s length exactly the same way Charlie had; apparently it was some sort of standard dad move they’d both picked up over the years. “We’re so glad you’re home. And that you finally brought Lucia!” he added, turning his smile on her. “Charlie and I have been so excited to meet you.”

“Oh, yes, you too, thanks,” Lucia said, stammering just a little. Charlie understood; they got this reaction a lot. If the years had been kind to Charlie—he was still as fit as ever, and while his hair had gone a little bit gray in parts, he’d at least kept most of it—they had been ludicrously, unfairly generous to Harvey. He had transformed over the last decade or so into a bona fide *silver fox,* his thick hair and tidy beard going gloriously salt-and-pepper. He’d also let Amelia pick out clothes for him for the past six years or so, and under her adventurous eye, his wardrobe had taken a slightly eclectic, Jeff Goldblum-y turn. On Charlie, the outfits would have been absurd—but on tall, slender, distinguished-looking Harvey, everything worked. (Once, on a trip to Zuzu City, a barista had shyly asked him where she’d seen him before. The answer was *nowhere,* but Charlie got it: between the clothes and the hair, Harvey just kind of *looked* famous nowadays.) The sight of him regularly made Charlie’s mouth go dry. It was a good thing they were married; Charlie’s staring could be interpreted as *how sweet, still so in love after all these years* instead of just *obnoxiously thirsty.*

“Dad. You’re doing it again,” Amelia complained, and Charlie made a mental edit: everyone except *his children* thought his staring was sweet. He looked away with effort, snagging Amelia in the crook of his elbow and ruffling her hair.

“How’d you do up there, sweet pea?”

“Killed it. As usual.” She grinned up at him, unabashedly self-confident. “I keep telling Papa I’m ready to solo, but he still won’t let me.”

“Honestly, he needs the practice more than you do. How long did it take him to stop shaking this time?”

“Six minutes, thirty seconds. Almost a new record!”

Often, when people looked at their little family of four—almost a set of nesting dolls, with five-foot-one Amelia on one end and six-foot-six Simon on the other—they got the impression that each of the children took after one of their parents, Amelia with Charlie and Simon with Harvey. Charlie could understand how people got this impression. Amelia was the human embodiment of enthusiasm, always bouncing from one thing to another, usually talking a mile a minute while she did it. She’d never met anyone she couldn’t talk to (or at least *at);* it was a good thing she’d grown up in safe little Pelican Town, because keeping her from talking to strangers would have been impossible. Meanwhile, Simon tended to hang back in groups, listening intently but rarely speaking until he was spoken to. Charlie supposed this reminded people of Harvey, who was still as adorably shy as ever at sixty-four.

But in truth, almost everyone had it backward. Simon was quiet at a party, it was true—but put him in front of a crowd with a microphone and a guitar, and he came to life in a way that had to be seen to be believed. He drew his energy from other people, from adoring fans and

applauding audiences. He craved the spotlight as intensely as Harvey shied away from it, and on top of all that, he had an impulsive streak to rival Charlie's. His current situation was a perfect example: having finished school almost two years ago, he'd been earning a steady, reliable living as a session musician for a studio in Zuzu City. Then he'd done one session for the group Lucia had been trying to put together, she'd asked him if he'd ever considered joining a band, and a month later, he was living in their tour bus.

And Amelia? His daughter was the most hardcore, irrepressible, dyed-in-the-wool nerd Charlie had ever met. (And he'd been married to *Harvey* for over two decades.) The mental algorithms that decided what would hook her attention next were a mystery to everyone except Amelia herself, but once she'd had her interest piqued, literally nothing would stop her from pursuing it. They'd been through long phases of chemistry, entomology, robotics (under the thrilled and watchful eye of her Aunt Maru), Latin, advanced math, Dungeons & Dragons, fantasy novels. Watching her flit from one obsession to another, Charlie and Harvey had spent years speculating what she would eventually end up doing with her life; it felt like watching a roulette wheel, flying through possibilities so quickly they blurred together, trying to guess where the ball would land.

For now, Amelia's wheel had come to a stop on farming, to Charlie's delight. She was headed into her sophomore year at Ferngill U, studying agricultural science. Each break, she came back with some new development to help the farm: soil testing, beneficial insects, companion planting. Charlie was happy to let her work her magic. He'd been a very successful farmer, but mostly out of a combination of hard work and luck; he'd done very little *science* around the place, and he was relieved to have someone thinking about these things. Their crops and animals were thriving more than ever under her care.

A month before Amelia's eighteenth birthday, Charlie and Harvey had sat down with her to discuss a surprise they'd been planning. They'd wanted to buy her a car to take to school, as they'd done for Simon when he'd left for college. But Amelia had surprised them: when they'd asked her what kind of car she'd like, she had pulled a Calico Desert newspaper clipping out of her pocket, smoothing it out on the table. The clipping had been an ad for a used Mooney M20 four-seater airplane.

Charlie wasn't used to being the one in the relationship to show restraint, but Harvey was too busy geeking out with their child, and someone had to be the responsible adult here. They'd had weeks of conversations: was it safe? Could they afford it? Was it going to hold Amelia's interest long enough to be worth it? Would Amelia be able to fly it to school? Would she regret not having a car once she got there? After a ton of research, months of lessons, multiple trips to the desert (including one with Maru so she could scour every inch of the thing for defects), and a lot of nail-biting, it turned out the answers to those questions were *yes, yes, yes, after a few more lessons,* and *no.* And while the flying still made him a little nervous (why had they not anticipated this when he'd let Harvey talk him into naming their daughter *Amelia?)* , so did the idea of their eldest son traveling cross-country with a rock band. On some level, to be a parent was to be anxious, but Charlie didn't want to pass that fear onto their kids. They'd bought the plane, Amelia had learned to fly like a champ, and finally, *finally* Harvey had been sufficiently motivated to work on his fear of heights.

“You all set up?” said Amelia, bringing him back to the present. She gestured toward the grange boxes, a dozen yards away. There had been more of them these last few years. Marnie and Pierre still competed, as did Charlie, of course. Barbara’s daughter Liz had put together a display of mouth-watering goods from her bakery, and on the end of the row…

“Sure,” Charlie said airily. “Not sure I needed to work so hard, though. The competition looks a little thin this year.”

“You’re going to regret that,” Amelia promised, wagging a finger in his face. “Sy, Lucia, come check out my display. The elders need their rest.”

“Watch it, whippersnapper,” Charlie called after her. As the three of them walked away, Harvey leaned in, brushing a kiss across Charlie’s cheek.

“How did her stuff look?”

“Amazing. She seriously might beat me this year.”

“Sixth time’s a charm,” Harvey murmured, smiling. “Any other kid would have given up by now.”

“That’s our girl,” Charlie agreed. “Your perfectionism and my stubbornness. A lethal combination.”

“Any other dad might have let her win by now, too,” Marnie said as she tidied her display, eavesdropping as unabashedly as ever. Charlie let out a scandalized noise.

“No way! I respect her too much *as a competitor.”*

“You don’t just want to keep adding to your ribbon collection?”

“Not at all. When *my* kid beats me, she’s going to know she earned it. She can be proud of herself.” Harvey gave a nod of solidarity, and Charlie eyed Marnie’s basket of multicolored eggs. “Anyway, it’s not like *you’d* let her win, even if I did.”

“She’s not my child,” Marnie said airily. “I don’t have to.”

“A convenient excuse.” Charlie turned back to Harvey, intending to ask his opinion on the positioning of the produce in his display (should the pomegranates and the sunflowers be next to each other for contrast, or would the beets look better in that spot?), but noticed his husband wincing. “You okay, darlin’?”

“Ah, it’s just my back,” Harvey sighed, bracing a hand against it. “From Charlotte’s little fall yesterday. I shouldn’t have tried to move her myself, it’s my own fault. I’m not thirty anymore.”

Charlie reached up to stroke the hair out of his eyes, feeling the same bittersweet pang he always did when they brushed up against this subject. “No, you’re not,” he agreed. “Thank Yoba. That would make me a real cradle-robber.” They’d been discussing the idea of Harvey’s retirement for years now, and hadn’t come to any satisfying conclusions. He was

ready to step back from clinic work, but not until he could find a replacement doctor who satisfied his requirements. As far as Charlie could tell, these included medical competency, good bedside manner, a willingness to devote their entire life to the well-being of the village, and an encyclopedic knowledge of everything that had ever happened to anyone in Pelican Town. Easy.

"All right, boys," came Lewis's voice from behind them. "Shall we get this show on the road?" Lewis was in his late eighties now and walking with a cane, but still healthy and sharp as a tack. Around ten years ago, he'd decided to retire from mayoring—but no one had stepped up to run, and so he'd ended up winning the election by default. Charlie wasn't sure who would take over once Lewis *actually* retired. Maybe he'd just stay mayor forever, living well into his hundreds out of sheer habit.

"I'm ready," Charlie declared, leaning around Marnie to raise his voice at Amelia. "If my opponents are done fraternizing."

Amelia snorted, as Simon and Lucia left her and headed into the crowd. "I was *born* ready, old man."

"I'm going to extract myself before this escalates," Harvey said, leaving Charlie with a kiss on the forehead. "Enjoy your trash talk, children. Try to keep it civil."

The first year Charlie had competed in the grange display, he'd thought the judging had taken forever. It couldn't have been more than fifteen or twenty minutes, but in the moment, it had been interminable. But the last few years, competing against Amelia, had made that first one feel like a breeze. Charlie's daughter was a good loser, covering her disappointment with bluster and declarations about next year, but he always saw her shine a little dimmed in the weeks after each loss. She worked *hard,* harder than any teenager Charlie had ever met, and he desperately wanted her hard work to be rewarded. (Amelia's first grange competition had been the first moment in his life Charlie had ever felt like a legitimate grown-up: realizing he wanted his child to win more than he wanted it for himself had been a staggering revelation.)

This year, Amelia's hard work had paid off in some truly ridiculous ways. Half her grange box was occupied by a single pumpkin the size of a Smart Car, and she wouldn't tell Charlie how she'd managed to grow it that big ("I'll tell you *after* I win, Dad"). A pile of smooth, oblong blue fruits nestled around it, which were apparently some kind of ancient fruit she'd managed to resurrect from a preserved seed. Beside those sat a jar of an alarmingly black paste— *void mayonnaise,* she'd called it, a recipe she'd learned from Krobus and produced using void eggs from Shane's void chicken. (Morrigan had hatched from the egg Charlie had bought from Krobus, and had apparently stopped aging once full-grown; she'd been around for over twenty years with no visible changes, laying her horrible black eggs every day and looking malevolent. But Harvey's fears had been unfounded—in every other sense, Morrie was a completely average chicken. No murders had ever taken place in the coop.)

Charlie found, once the judging was underway, that he'd lost his appetite for trash talk. He watched as Lewis examined Amelia's giant pumpkin, her strange blue fruits, and tried to guess at what he might be writing down based on the movements of his pen. After two fruitless minutes of this, he gave up and turned his attention to his most reliable source of calm. Harvey stood near the front of the crowd, surrounded by the little cluster of Simon,

Lucia, Maru, and Shane. The other four talked excitedly around him, but Harvey was quiet, his eyes fixed on Charlie. When Charlie met his gaze, his husband smiled at him, just as he had at during that first grange competition two and a half decades ago. He gave a little nod, and Charlie didn't know whether it meant *you're going to win* or *she's going to win* or just *I'm proud of you both,* but it warmed him through all the same. He returned the smile, feeling his nerves settle a bit.

Finally, Lewis made his way through all the competitors, and finally, he gave his speech about how talented and deserving each of them were. And as Charlie wrung his hands hard enough to bruise his fingers, Lewis finally announced, "The winner of this year's grange competition, with 107 points, is...Amelia!"

"YES!" Charlie bellowed, not even realizing he was going to yell until his mouth opened. He punched both fists into the air, feeling the loss as though it were a victory, as though he'd won ten times over. 107 points, that was a *perfect score,* she'd not only beaten him but beaten the *record,* he was maybe going to cry in front of everyone he knew and he didn't care. Before he could rush down the row and sob all over his baby girl like the embarrassing father he was, Amelia barreled past Marnie, Pierre, and Liz, flinging herself into Charlie's arms.

"I did it!" she cried, a bit muffled from pressing her face into Charlie's shirt. "Dad! I won!" She turned her face up to him, flushed with her victory, and grinned. Charlie's face hurt from smiling. His daughter was driven and talented and brilliant, and he was proud and grateful for all that—but she was also a teenager still willing to hug her old dad in front of the whole town, and *that* was worth more to him than all the prize ribbons Lewis could ever hand out.

"Congratulations, sweet pea," he murmured into her hair. "I'm proud of you."

In the next moment they were surrounded. Harvey's arms went around them first, then Simon's, then Maru's and Marnie's and Shane's. (While Shane's vocabulary was still as prickly as ever, some of his sharper edges had worn down over the years. He'd lost his disdain for hugs by the time Amelia was two. Charlie still found it hilarious to be embraced by a man whose primary terms of endearment were *farm boy, asshole* and *motherfucker,* but he appreciated the affection anyway.) Charlie couldn't make out a word over the din of everyone congratulating her at once, but he got the general gist. Looking up, he saw that the rest of the town was cheering equally raucously. Penny and James clapped along with their teenage triplets, Charlotte, Anne, and Emily (who everyone in town referred to as Em, in deference to the "first" Emily). Richard stood with Jas, her husband Ray, and her two young kids, all cheering as though they didn't mind Marnie's loss one bit. Sam's son Nathan waved to Simon, Sam smiling with a hand on his shoulder. From every angle, love and support flowed toward them, and Charlie felt wholly, completely at home.

The hug broke up eventually. Maru and Shane drifted away to chat with Jas; Simon returned to Lucia, grinning sheepishly. Amelia immediately tore off to the prize stand with Charlotte, Anne, and Em. Only Harvey didn't step away, keeping an arm slung comfortably around Charlie's waist.

"This is the strangest feeling," Harvey said. "Am I supposed to console you or congratulate you? Or both?"

“No consolation required. I’ve honestly never been happier to lose.”

“You’re a good dad.” Charlie felt Harvey’s lips against the top of his head, and let his eyes fall closed. He was grateful the grange competition was held in the morning; he felt much better prepared to enjoy the Fair now that his nerves had settled.

And, he reminded himself, he could finally ask Amelia how she’d grown that damn pumpkin.

When he opened his eyes again, Simon and Lucia had made their way back over. “So, dads,” Lucia said. “Simon tells me there’s an order you have to do things at the Fair?”

“Oh, yes,” Charlie said, as Harvey nodded sagely beside him. “We’ve developed a specific sequence of events for maximum enjoyment and minimal backtracking. It’s been the work of a lifetime.”

“The Fair’s only been this big since I was fourteen, dad. It’s not even the work of *my* lifetime.”

“I’m intrigued,” Lucia said, wisely ignoring Simon. “Any chance you’d be willing to show me how it’s done?”

You picked a good sport, Sy, Charlie thought.

“We’d be honored.” Harvey stepped forward, gesturing toward the Stardrop. “There’s a rigorous schedule, of course, but tradition dictates beginning with lunch.”

“Lead the way.”

It had been many, many years since Charlie and Harvey had anyone new to show around town. Simon had brought one or two friends home from school before, but usually not for the Fair. And at the time, Simon had been stuck in a phase of being deeply embarrassed by *everything*— his dads, his neighbors, his wholesome little town. It hadn’t lasted long, fortunately, but tours of the village weren’t much fun when the tourists were scoffing teenage boys. They’d nodded and shrugged their way through Charlie and Harvey’s explanations, retreating as quickly as possible to Simon’s cabin (a tiny shed they’d converted for him when he turned fourteen).

But Lucia was an excellent guest. She asked questions, listened attentively to stories, played carnival games with a competitiveness to rival Charlie’s, laughed at their very worst dad jokes. She was friendly to the endless parade of neighbors who greeted her, always asking them about themselves and the town. She listened for far longer to Shane’s rambling explanation of chicken genetics than anyone ever had, not walking away until Maru cut in and rescued her. When Harvey beat her in the slingshot game, she thumped her fist on the stall and blurted out a loud *“Fuck!”* before turning brilliant scarlet and covering her mouth with her hands (Charlie, whose wires had obviously been crossed by his years of friendship with Shane, found this incredibly charming).

And she obviously cared about Simon. When Harvey lapsed into a moment of nostalgia, mentioning the year Simon had spent his entire allowance on bags of popcorn and fed every kernel to Shane's chickens in the petting zoo, she pressed him for more details: how old he had been, whether he'd liked all animals or chickens were his favorite, what he'd looked like as a little boy. Harvey had promised to show her baby photos back at the house, and though Simon had blushed and groaned *"Pops,"* he hadn't actually argued. Charlie got the distinct impression that Simon wanted her to know these things about him, that he was pleased by her interest. He carefully filed all these bits of evidence away to pore over and dissect with Harvey later.

Hours into the afternoon, Simon stepped away to talk with Nathan. Sam's son was twenty, still in school for music, and clearly thought Simon was some kind of god. He hung on his every word, asking questions about the tour in such a rapid-fire way it sounded as though he'd made a list in advance. (He probably had.) Charlie took the opportunity to fetch beers for the rest of them, and when he came back he found Harvey and Lucia engrossed in a friendly argument about jazz.

"I just wasn't really raised with it," Lucia was saying. "But I have a ton of respect for it."

"But Lucia, *so much* of the music we listen to now has its roots in jazz!" This was a line of argument Charlie had heard approximately 400,000 times in the last twenty-six years, and he prepared a new conversational prompt for when Lucia politely dismissed it.

But to his surprise, she didn't. "Of course," she agreed. "I mean, 'Pretty' Purdie made me want to play the drums, and obviously *he* wouldn't have been doing what he did without Art Blakey, so I totally get it. It's just not my thing personally." She accepted her beer from Charlie, smiling in thanks. "I'd love to be proven wrong, though. Maybe you can play me some of your favorites back at the house."

If Charlie squinted, he could almost make out the cartoon hearts in Harvey's eyes. "I would love to," Harvey gushed. "In fact, I've got a pressing of *Krupa and Rich* that—"

"Hey, Lu," Simon interrupted, returning to the group. "Think we should start getting ready."

"Got it. Sorry, Dr. Harvey. I'd love to hear it later, though."

"Oh, please, just 'Harvey' is fine," he stammered, as Simon led Lucia away toward the clinic. Charlie slipped his fingers through Harvey's, laughing.

"Do *you* have a crush on her now?"

"Charlie. She talked about Art Blakey."

"I heard."

"She wants to listen to jazz."

"I know, darlin'."

He looked down at Charlie, seeming to break out of his trance. “Simon has good taste, doesn’t he?”

“Of course he does,” Charlie declared, tugging him off toward the stage. “We raised him.”

Standing near the stage outside the Stardrop, Charlie could hardly believe Gus had ever struggled to pay the bills. The beer garden overflowed with people, and an equally dense crowd milled around in the “dance floor” area in front of the stage. Charlie didn’t recognize the band that currently occupied it, a group of folk musicians about his own age who played some kind of lively (and, frankly, kind of annoying) jig. But he wanted to get a good spot to watch the next performance, so he took up a post near the center of the crowd with Harvey and did his best to look like he was enjoying the music.

It *was* a good spot for people-watching, though. There was the usual conglomeration of tourists, of course, and more familiar faces. Emily and Sandy danced together, and based on their rhythm and style, Charlie guessed they were hearing something completely different than he was. Abigail, Sebastian and Sam leaned against the patio railing, talking animatedly. There were differences in this little group: Sam’s elaborate hairstyle had given way to something shaggier and less maintenance-intensive; Sebastian had stopped both smoking and dyeing his own hair, which was now a chestnut brown; Abigail was tough and muscular and wore the scars of her many expeditions into caverns and mines. And a few feet away, Jas stood back, smiling as her husband Ray danced with their two children. Charlie racked his brain for their ages—there were a *lot* of kids in his life these days—and drew a complete blank. He nudged Harvey, nodding in their direction.

“How old are Jas’s kids now?”

“Ada is four and Theo is two,” Harvey said instantly. He never had lost the mental encyclopedia about their fellow villagers, even when those villagers had grown up and moved away and taken their children to a city pediatrician. Charlie often felt his age these days. He was still in great shape, no major health problems—they’d both been incredibly lucky there, minus one nightmarish cancer scare when Harvey was fifty-five that had turned out to be nothing—but he knew he’d slowed down a little in the fields, had to ask Harvey for more massages than he used to. And yet *nothing,* not even his own children going off to college and jobs, made him feel as old as seeing Jas. She’d been so little when he’d arrived in Pelican Town; he felt as though he’d known her for her entire life. And now she had two children, and one of them was only a little younger than she had been when they’d met. Charlie looked at her, standing off to the side and beaming with maternal affection, and thought, *when the fuck did we all get so old?*

Maybe she felt his eyes on the back of her neck, or maybe she’d overheard Harvey saying her kids’ names, because she turned to look at them. Her face brightening, she edged through the crowd and into their little pocket of space.

“Hi, you two,” she said, raising her voice above the music. “Where’s Amelia? Off celebrating somewhere?”

“She ran off with the triplets. Now that she’s finally beaten me, she’ll never give me the time of day again.”

“Oh, come on. We both know *that’s* not true.” She snorted. “Aunt Marnie is thrilled. This was the third year in a row she predicted Amelia would finally beat you. She’s already forgotten about the last two predictions, of course.”

“Of course.”

“How have you been?” Harvey asked. “Everything going well at work?”

“Oh, yeah, you know how it is. Crazy busy, but can’t complain.”

They made small talk about all the usual things: Ada’s preschool, Theo’s progress toward full sentences, Ray’s cooking, Jas’s patients. She launched into an apparently hilarious story about one of her nurses, Harvey doubling over with laughter while Charlie tried desperately to translate all the acronyms into comprehensible English. They remarked on Marnie’s newest calf, a sweet brown one who’d been born just a few days prior. Theo and Ada had been present for the birth, and precocious Ada had been telling the story at a blistering pace to anyone who held still long enough ever since. It was rare that they got such a long visit; Charlie wished he knew her kids better. Theo was young enough to be more or less a mystery, and Charlie suspected Ada was as smart and determined as Jas had been herself at that age.

“It’s been so great to see you,” he said, watching the kids twirling away with their dad. “I know you were just back for Moonlight Jellies, but you couldn’t stay as long then.”

“I know.” She grimaced, tucking a stray strand of hair behind her ear. “It’s always so hard to get away from the practice, and then every time we’re here I wish we could stay longer. The kids love it on the ranch, I think they’ve gotten more fresh air in the last week than they have all year. And they adore Aunt Marnie, and Richard, and Uncle Shane and Maru.”

“It’s a nice place for kids,” Charlie agreed. “Don’t need me to tell you that, obviously.”

“Right.” They watched as Ray tossed Ada into the air, spinning her around; she shrieked with delight, Theo hopping in an excited circle. Jas let out a sigh, looking miles away for a moment.

“Is everything all right?” Harvey asked. She nodded absently.

“Sure. It’s fine. Just...thinking, you know? I love my job, but sometimes I worry they’re missing out. And me, too. I never get to spend as much time with them as I want.” She offered Harvey a small, pained smile. “You had the best of both worlds. You got to be a doctor *and* a parent. It’s harder in the city.”

Harvey glanced at Charlie over her shoulder, and Charlie held his gaze for a long moment. He knew, without anyone speaking, that they were thinking the same thing. When Harvey turned back to Jas, he took off his glasses to polish them on his tie.

“Before you head back to the city,” he said, “can I buy you a drink? We can talk shop a little, and...there’s something I’d like to discuss. A business proposition.”

Jas looked at him, clearly intrigued, and her smile shifted into something brighter. “All right,” she agreed. “I’d like that.”

The folk music ended to a round of applause. (Charlie suspected part of the reason the stage had been built so near the beer garden was to ensure an enthusiastic crowd, no matter who was playing.) The lead—who played, what was that, an accordion?—thanked everyone and filed off stage, and then instruments were being rearranged and mic stands adjusted, and *then* Charlie couldn’t spare any more of his attention for conversation because—

An opening guitar chord sounded, sustained for a long moment. Charlie still didn’t know that much about music, all things considered. He knew a lot of jazz musicians, could identify most of Harvey’s favorites, could even take an educated guess about things like time signatures. But he knew Simon’s music like the back of his hand. During his son’s teen years, when he’d started to be really serious about music, he’d been adamant that nobody could hear the songs he wrote until he’d deemed them perfect—which he never did. And so Charlie and Harvey had spent hours sitting on the ground below his window, listening to his deepening voice and increasingly complex chords, hearing his songs take shape. It wasn’t that they didn’t think he deserved his privacy; they were just so desperately curious, so excited to hear what Simon’s future would sound like.

The day the band’s first album had released, four months ago, Charlie had actually gotten up and to the mailbox *before* the mail came. He had done the feeding and grooming and milking for their sleepy and bewildered herd of animals, always keeping one ear out for the sound of tires on gravel. When the mail had finally arrived, halfway through checking the seals on their wine kegs, he’d dropped his tools on the floor of the shed and sprinted to the mailbox quickly enough to get a stitch in his side. He’d returned inside with their preorder copy to find Harvey waiting by the stereo with two cups of coffee, as impatient as he was. And then they’d spent the next two hours listening and relistening, examining lyrics, debating how Simon must have been feeling on this song or what he’d been thinking during that one. Amelia had arrived home for the summer a few weeks later, and they’d gone over it all again with her.

“This one’s the second track on the album, isn’t it?” Harvey asked, leaning close to keep his voice down. Charlie nudged him, grinning.

“You ask like you didn’t memorize the liner notes.”

“Okay, guilty as charged.” They listened for a long moment, still huddled together in their little bubble of paternal pride. “It sounds different without Mark and Connor and Panit.”

“Mm. At least we got the important ones.” Worn out from touring, Simon’s other bandmates understandably hadn’t been eager to double back halfway across the country to play a village festival. When Simon had suggested it, Charlie had assumed he’d come alone and perform a solo set; Lucia’s participation had been a happy surprise. The songs sounded different with only the two of them. They’d altered their arrangements, playing up Simon’s melodies and

dialing back Lucia's beats to keep from overwhelming the guitar. Charlie liked the band anyway, but he wasn't going to complain about an opportunity to hear Simon better.

"Why do you think Lucia came with him?" Harvey murmured, several songs later.

"I have some theories."

"I'm guessing it probably wasn't just for a seaside retreat."

"Doubtful, although this town *is* still charming as hell."

"True." Harvey looked around at the gathered crowd, at the Square that was both so familiar and so different. "I worried it might lose that when it started growing, but it hasn't."

"Some things just keep getting better with time," Charlie said, winking. Harvey turned pink, smiling shyly at him as though Charlie hadn't been relentlessly hitting on him for twenty-six years running. It was still one of Charlie's favorite looks on him.

He was distracted enough by his adorable husband, he hadn't noticed the song ending. "Thanks so much, everybody," Simon was saying. Charlie and Harvey stopped flirting and paid attention. "It's really good to be home. There's a lot of things you miss when you're touring. Festivals like this one. Summer in the Valley. Gus's cooking." There was a rumble of laughter and a smattering of applause from the crowd, and Gus raised his drink with a grin. One of his grandkids—Charlie could never remember if that one was Artie or Marty, they were only a year apart and nearly identical—hugged him around the legs. "And this year, unfortunately, I missed something big.

"All of you were here, so you know my dads celebrated twenty-five years of marriage this summer. I hear there was a great party. Wish I could have been there, but we couldn't make the timing work out." Simon met Charlie's eye, smiling regretfully, and Charlie smiled back. He'd wished Simon could be there, too, but he could never be upset that his son was finding success at his dreams. Harvey wrapped an arm around his shoulders. "So if you don't mind, we're going to play something a little outside our usual style. One of their favorites. We'll just need a little help from a friend. Nate?"

Simon stepped away from the microphone and put down his guitar, turning around to reach into a case off to the side. From the corner of his eye, Charlie saw Nathan climb onto the stage and settle himself at the piano; Lucia gave him an encouraging smile. When Simon straightened again, he held a muted trumpet in his hands. Charlie glanced up at Harvey, who was watching the proceedings with obvious excitement; he met Charlie's eye and grinned.

"I haven't seen him play the trumpet since he was twelve," Harvey whispered. "Do you think he's been practicing?"

Nathan came in first, playing a series of soft, wistful arpeggios, and Charlie instantly knew the song. Judging by the way Harvey's arm tightened around him, he did, too. After about twenty seconds, Simon and Lucia came in together, and yes, Simon *had* clearly been practicing. The smoky opening notes of *It Never Entered My Mind* floated through the crowd, as familiar to Charlie as Harvey's voice. He found himself transported back in time, more

than twenty-five years earlier, turning slowly on the rug in Harvey's old apartment and feeling real love coursing through him for the first time in his life.

If someone had asked him back then, in the breathless early days just after he and Harvey had declared their love for one another, he would have confidently asserted that he'd reached the full capacity of his heart—that he was so in love, the feeling couldn't be improved upon. Now, standing in Harvey's arms with twenty-five years of adventures and joys and heartaches and surprises between them, he wanted to laugh at that naive, arrogant boy. The kind of love he felt for Harvey now had evolved so much, it was practically a different species. And of course, he felt so much for Simon and Amelia, it sometimes seemed as though he'd grown entirely new chambers of his heart to contain it all.

He felt the brush of Harvey's beard against his temple, bringing him back to the present day. "Dance with me?" Harvey whispered, and Charlie turned to face him. Their hands found their positions without discussion, the result of two decades of practice. Looking up into Harvey's beloved face, a little more lined and a lot more gray but even more handsome than ever, Charlie saw all his own thoughts reflected there. (Eventually, they'd more or less gotten the hang of the ESP thing.) Charlie smiled at him, trying to transmit all he felt without words.

"It just occurred to me," Harvey murmured, "do you think he knows this is a sad song?"

"I don't think he's ever heard it with lyrics. We've only ever played him the Quintet version." Charlie tucked his head under Harvey's chin, swaying to the music. "It doesn't make *me* sad."

"Me, either."

"Or maybe he was hoping if he played something sad, we wouldn't be as gross with our PDA," Charlie joked. He thought he'd said it quietly, but from a few feet away, a chorus of laughs went up. Turning, he saw Amelia standing with Maru and Shane, watching them.

"He knows better than that," Amelia said, rolling her eyes. Shane agreed.

"Twenty-five years in, you're just as disgusting as ever."

"Is that true?" Harvey leaned back, meeting Charlie's eye again. "I really thought we'd toned it down. Are we disgusting?"

"Don't listen to them," Charlie assured him, going up on tiptoe to kiss Harvey's cheek. "That's just what people say when they're jealous."

Harvey caught Charlie's chin and turned his head, kissing him on the lips instead; Charlie thought it was possible there were some derisive noises from the peanut gallery, but he wasn't paying attention. As they broke away, he grinned at Harvey.

"I solemnly swear to keep disgusting our children for years to come," he said, and Harvey beamed back at him. "And hey. Eventually we might have a whole new generation of kids to annoy."

Before Harvey could respond to this, the song ended. They released each other but didn't move apart, turning just enough to clap with everyone else. Simon's eyes found them in the crowd, and Charlie and Harvey cheered at the top of their lungs. Charlie felt so much pride, so much gratitude, so *much,* period. And one glance at Harvey's face told him he felt the same way. At his other side, he felt a denim-jacketed arm loop through his: Amelia, leaning against him as she cheered for her brother.

Once Simon had put his trumpet away and retrieved his guitar, he turned back to the crowd. Charlie fell silent again, surprised. Were they going to keep playing? It had seemed like a kind of finale, but maybe they were going to play a few more of their own songs? Amelia's arm tightened around his, and looking down, he saw her biting her lip in a decidedly suspicious way. "What," he demanded, holding her at arm's length. "What do you know?"

"I have no idea what you're talking about," she managed, clearly fighting not to laugh.

"Amelia—"

"Oh, look, they're going to start again!"

It was a painfully obvious deflection, but it was also true, and so Charlie shut up. "Hope you guys liked that one," Simon was saying. "Like I said, that's one of my dads' favorites. A real classic. Very respectable." He looked straight at Harvey, his smile turning into a smirk that couldn't possibly bode well, and leaned in closer to the microphone. "But if you'll hang in there for a few more minutes, we'd also like to play my dad Harvey's *real* favorite song."

"Oh no," Harvey moaned.

"He wouldn't," Charlie assured him.

But he would, as it turned out. The first line of *Take A Chance On Me* filled the Square, and as their neighbors laughed, Harvey let out a sigh that seemed to come from his toes. "Well, we had a good run," he said, raising his voice above the music. "Amelia, I'm sorry I have to disown your brother, but look on the bright side. You get everything in the will now."

"She helped him plan it," Maru volunteered cheerfully, earning a gasp of horror from Amelia. "She called him from our place, I heard her talking about it."

"Aunt Maru!" Amelia cried. "That was a secret!"

"Betrayal all around," Harvey said mournfully. "What happened to you two? I thought I raised honest, loving kids." He raised an eyebrow at Charlie. "Did *you* know too? I might never recover from that."

"Of course not," Charlie said. *"I'm* loyal. You know me." Harvey looked at Amelia, silently requesting confirmation, and she shook her head.

"He actually didn't."

"Sweet pea," Harvey said, in a distinctly ominous tone, "I hope it was worth it. Because I'm going to buy a *whole book* of dad jokes and save them up for the first date you bring home."

“I’m moving in with you guys,” Amelia declared instantly, rounding on Maru and Shane. “Least you can do after you sold me out.”

“We’ll...discuss it,” Shane said.

“You think you’ll be safe with them?” Harvey scoffed. “Maru and I saved up *dozens* of them when we were working together. It was the only way we could ever get Vincent to sit still for his vaccinations.”

“You’re bluffing.”

“Ha. Maru, why did the scarecrow win an award?” he asked.

“Because he was outstanding in his field!” she replied, grinning, and Amelia threw up her hands.

“Yoba, I regret everything. I’m out of here.”

“Hi, Out Of Here, I’m Dad!” Harvey and Maru called after her in unison, and she covered both of her ears as she scurried away.

Later—after Simon had clambered down off the stage and hugged them both, and after Harvey had pretended to be angry for a full eight seconds before bursting out laughing, and after Charlie and Harvey had both foisted hugs upon Lucia too, and gotten Simon to collect his wayward sister again—Charlie had extracted Maru and headed off to the farm, leaving the others to pile Simon and Lucia’s belongings into the back of Shane’s truck. It would take a few minutes for the roadblocks to be cleared for the night, which gave Charlie the perfect opportunity to get home and finish setting up before everyone else made it back.

“How did you get it all done?” Maru asked him as they walked, her arm looped comfortably around his. “Without that nosy kid of yours finding out?”

“Well, conveniently, she was so hell-bent on keeping her grange box a secret from me, she stayed with the triplets the last two nights. I think she stashed that giant pumpkin in their shed.”

“Yoba. Penny and James are saints.”

“You’d have to be, to deal with three teenagers at once.” They were almost to the farm now, the house peeking through the gaps between trees, and Charlie put a hand over Maru’s. “Wait here for a minute, okay? I want you to see the full effect. One sec!”

He dashed up to the front porch, leaving a bemused Maru standing in the road, and found himself greeted by their fierce watchdog. Beverly intercepted him halfway up the steps, butting her head against his knees and refusing to move until the minimum acceptable number of scratches had been doled out. “Hey, sweet girl,” he murmured, ducking down to kiss the top of her brown head. “Gonna have some guests in a few. Get ready.” When she trotted away to investigate Maru, he found what he’d been looking for: the end of the

extension cord he'd laid out earlier. He plugged it into the outlet on the front porch, turning and gesturing grandly.

"Okay, ready! What do you think?"

"Wow, dude," Maru gasped, stepping wide-eyed onto the path with a panting Beverly in tow. "This must have been a *ton* of work."

"Eh, some."

Charlie wasn't usually all that self-congratulatory, but in his humble opinion, he'd done a pretty great fucking job. The patch of grass in front of the farmhouse played host to a long wooden table, one of Robin's Winter Star pieces she'd let him borrow. It was surrounded by seven chairs, each of them decorated with a swag of fall leaves and blackberries. A burlap runner spanned the length of the table, and he'd piled it with as many flowers and fruits as he could fit: tall vases of sunflowers, squat dishes of pomegranates and hazelnuts, garlands of fairy roses intertwining through it all. He'd put up posts in a semicircle around the table, and strands of string lights stretched from these to a central point above the porch, making a glowing canopy against the (eventually) darkening sky. On the porch, he'd placed a wooden sign reading CONGRATULATIONS, AMELIA! Maru pointed at this, raising an eyebrow.

"You were that sure she was going to win?"

"Of course I was."

"What if she hadn't?"

Putting a finger to his lips— *our little secret*— Charlie picked it up and flipped it over. The letters on the back read WELCOME HOME, SIMON! Maru laughed, nodding as Charlie settled it back in place.

"Solid backup plan. You had a good reason for a party either way."

"Definitely." Charlie hadn't really needed a reason. Mostly, he was just thrilled to have both his kids—and the famous Lucia—back home, but Amelia's win had given him an excuse to be a little *extra* about it. Their dinner party probably would have been lovely without the pomegranates, or the string lights, or the hundreds of flowers he'd packed into Amelia's little cabin (inherited from her brother when he left home), but it had been a long time since he'd gone all-out.

He and Maru made their way inside, Beverly hot on their heels. "So. Did you actually need help cooking? Because if so, I'm not sure why you thought I'd be your best bet."

"Nah. I just wanted someone to keep me company. Figured we'd leave Shane to do the heavy lifting."

"That I can do."

Forty-five minutes and a few cups of coffee later, Maru's rambling explanation of her latest project ("I decided to finally just build my mom the power loader from *Aliens,* because fuck

it, why not?") was interrupted by the crunching of tires on gravel. Charlie turned off the stove and wiped his hands hastily on his apron, rushing out to the front porch before the truck could park. Almost before it had, Amelia leapt out of the truck bed, her jaw dropping.

"Dad! Oh my god!"

"A triumph six years in the making deserves a little celebration, don't you think?" he asked, catching her as she dashed up the steps to hug him. "And a chance to show off in front of Lucia," he added in an undertone, earning a snicker from his daughter.

"It's so pretty," she marveled, gazing overhead at the lights. "You did all this last night?"

"Most of it. Some of it I might have been doing in the wine shed for the last week."

Amelia turned her gaze on him, her dark eyes a little damp, and beamed. "Thanks, Daddy," she whispered, something she never called him anymore, and suddenly the air felt a little dusty to Charlie's eyes too. She gave him a last little squeeze, then turned back toward the truck, wiping her eyes. "Papa! Did you help with this?"

"Not at all, darling," Harvey called, stepping down out of the cab as Simon and Lucia clambered out of the bed. "Your dad had a *vision.* I didn't dare interfere." He crossed to the porch, tilting his face up to accept a kiss from Charlie. "Beautiful work, sunflower," he added softly, and Charlie felt as warm and glowing as the string lights.

"Uncle Shane, don't, let me get that," Simon was saying, rushing to help him get their luggage from the truck bed. Shane waved him off, rolling his eyes.

"I'm fifty-six, kid, I'm not going to break my back lifting a damn guitar. Get the other one."

"Simon said it was beautiful here, but wow," Lucia said, turning slowly on the spot. "What a gorgeous place. You guys really work all this by yourself?"

"Not exactly," Charlie hedged. "Harvey and I used to do most of it, but now Amelia does a lot, too. And we hire some of the teenagers around town to help during big harvests. There's enough hands to go around, when we need them."

"Is there anything I can give you a hand with now? For dinner?"

"That's sweet of you to offer, Lucia, but actually, things are almost ready. Just need to let a couple things finish up in the oven and then carry it all outside." Lucia nodded, staring up at the house, and an idea occurred to Charlie. "Want a little tour while we wait?"

She smiled at him, glancing across her face at Simon, who was now occupied in trying to ward off the luggage-carrying efforts of both Shane *and* Maru. "I'd love one."

"You got it. Ames, you're in charge here, all right? Keep an ear out for that timer. V, let's show Lucia around."

They'd given farm tours a hundred times; Charlie could do it in his sleep. He'd showed off the place to new neighbors, to students on field trips, to the governor during one Luau trip.

He'd showed it to Qi, who'd finally visited from the desert after almost a decade of friendship, and to his mother, who had finally allowed herself to be dragged home by the irresistible lure of grandchildren. He knew what tidbits of farm life guests would find interesting (that enclosure on wheels is called a chicken tractor!) and which ones they'd prefer not to know (each cow produces almost 70 pounds of manure a day!). He knew which path to take at this time of day to show the fields off in their best light. He knew that the most efficient route took them through the barn, around the wine shed, past Amelia's cabin, and across the little bridge he'd built over the pond a decade or so ago.

He was conscious, though, that the stakes were a little higher with this one. What was a governor, compared to the apparent love of his son's life? Even if he'd chosen a different path for himself, the farm was in Simon's blood. Charlie wanted to make Lucia fall in love with the place, to make her understand why it was special. Judging by the way Harvey squeezed his hand, he was thinking the same thing.

"You know what? I'm not sure we have time for the whole farm right now. It's prettier at sunrise, anyway, if you don't mind getting up."

"As long as there's coffee."

"Definitely coffee." Charlie smiled at her, gesturing up the steps. "We do have time for the house, though, if you want? There aren't any farm animals, but there are baby photos."

Lucia's face lit up, and that was that. They squeezed their way in past Beverly, who was determined to go through the door at the *exact same time* as Charlie. In the kitchen, dishes covered every horizontal surface: platters of food ready to go outside, pots and pans Charlie hadn't had time to scrub yet, a bowl of chips he and Maru had been snacking from. He hurried Lucia through to the living room, grimacing apologetically.

"It's not in the best shape right now, sorry. Takes a lot of work to feed this crowd."

"I don't judge. Honestly, there are probably still dishes in the sink back in my apartment," Lucia said. "It smells amazing. What are we having?"

"Don't bother," Harvey sighed. "He won't even tell *me.* It's some kind of big surprise, apparently."

"Ooh. Can't wait, then."

There wasn't much of interest in the living room—although Lucia made appropriately appreciative noises about the fire in the enormous stone fireplace—and they made a brief trek through Charlie and Harvey's bedroom just so they could reach Harvey's little office. Harvey showed her his shelves of model planes, his radio equipment, the collection of books and memorabilia he'd been receiving for Father's Day gifts for years. Watching him explain it all, Charlie thought back to the first time he'd entered Harvey's old apartment. How shy Harvey had been about it all, how embarrassed. He was a changed man now; apparently, decades of being relentlessly adored had chased away his bashfulness. (Mostly. Charlie could still get him to blush if he tried hard enough, and he did, often.)

Their tour got briefly derailed by a discussion about turntables ("Linn is great, Dr. Harvey, but if you've never listened on a Rega you're missing out"), and Charlie had to hurry them out of the room before Harvey started digging through his vinyl collection in a quest to prove her wrong. As they reached the top of the stairs to the study, Lucia let out a gasp.

"What *is* all this stuff?" she asked, leaning down to squint at an enormous red crystal perched on a bookshelf. "It's like a museum in here!"

Charlie was used to it all, and Harvey was the designated duster in their house, so he didn't often notice the things that filled their study anymore. But he supposed it *was* pretty strange-looking from the outside. Their shelves still held mostly books, but here and there were tokens of his mining expeditions: crystals, fossils, the occasional bone or totem or old piece of armor. Gunther hadn't wanted any of it, so he assumed it wasn't especially valuable or rare, but it was kind of fun to remember a time when he'd been young and daring.

He still didn't miss the mines, though.

"Charlie used to have some, ah, interesting hobbies," Harvey offered, smirking at him. "And an unhealthy fixation on Indiana Jones."

"And...a sword?" Lucia said, gesturing curiously to the wall above the mantel. She looked a little bewildered, glancing back and forth between it and the other artifacts in the room, and Charlie understood why. Harvey's fastidiousness kept every object in this room clean, no matter how annoying—the nooks and crannies in one particular amethyst crystal had elicited a lot of swearing over the years—but the Galaxy Sword, mounted high up on the wall, was covered in a thick layer of dust. It stuck out a little, Charlie knew. He exchanged a glance with Harvey; how much should they tell her? How weird was too weird? After a moment's silent deliberation, he nodded.

"That one's a long story," he said, "and kind of...a superstition thing. We'll tell you about it some other time."

"When we don't have photos to look at," Harvey added, gesturing to the former kids' room, and Lucia hurried inside with a look of delight.

They were late for dinner—or rather, *dinner* was late, since Charlie was the one serving it. How could they not be, with Lucia making her way slowly down the back wall and asking questions about every photo hanging there? It would have been *rude* to hurry her along, Charlie reasoned. The food would keep; he might never have another opportunity to show off baby Amelia's legendary dimples or toddler Simon's wild hair.

"He never has liked haircuts," Harvey chuckled, as Lucia examined a photo of eight-year-old Simon. He stood in the middle of a row of blueberries, grinning with purple-stained hands and two missing teeth—and tangled black hair down to his shoulders. "I think we maybe managed to coax him into one a year, if we were lucky."

“It’s working for him now,” Lucia said. “You wouldn’t believe the number of ‘Simon’s hair appreciation’ posts on Twitter after every show.”

“Twitter,” Charlie gasped, “why have we never thought to check *Twitter,* V?”

“I don’t really know how to work Twitter,” Harvey admitted sheepishly. Lucia laughed, moving on to the next photo.

“You’re better off, trust me. Oh, this one’s so cute!”

It *was* so cute. It was maybe Charlie’s favorite, actually. In early summer, he’d headed out to weed the sunflower patch while Harvey was on clinic duty. That meant taking both kids with him—eighteen-month-old Amelia strapped to his back, and five-year-old Simon wandering along in his wake. The stalks stood knee-high on Charlie, reaching almost to Simon’s shoulders. Charlie had been raking up weeds Simon had helped pull, not paying any attention, when he’d heard a camera shutter go off. Harvey had come home early from work, and apparently his photo op senses had been tingling. There was nothing special about the moment in the picture—Amelia waving a dimpled hand at a passing butterfly, Simon smiling over his shoulder in surprise, Charlie whistling to himself as he raked—but that was why Charlie loved it so much. It was a tiny slice of their lives together, preserved exactly how he remembered it.

Harvey came up beside him, settling a hand in the small of his back; Charlie leaned into him, feeling unexpectedly emotional. He knew the “looking at baby photos” thing was a joke from old sitcoms—the parents threatening to embarrass their children by showing pictures to their dates. Outing them for their questionable hair decisions, their braces, their youthful fashion mistakes. But Charlie didn’t mean it as a threat. No part of him had ever wanted to truly embarrass his kids. Instead, he meant it as an homage, as a love letter. *Look how much we’ve adored them,* he tried to say without words, leading Lucia through the years of Simon’s and Amelia’s lives. *Look what they’ve meant to us. Can you believe that out of all the kids in the world, we somehow got the best two?*

“Dad, Pops,” Simon said from the doorway, as though summoned by his thoughts. “Ready to come down for dinner? We’ve been calling you.”

“Sorry, kiddo,” Charlie said, straightening up and smiling past the lump in his throat. “We’ll come down.”

“It’s my fault,” Lucia added. “They couldn’t hear you over all my screaming about how cute you were.”

Simon looked as though he wanted to roll his eyes, but he noticed what photo Lucia was standing in front of—still the one out in the sunflower patch. His eyes softened, and he reached out to straighten it minutely on the wall. “Well,” he said softly, “that *is* a pretty good one.”

“Yoba,” Amelia said through a mouthful of food, her eyes falling closed as she chewed. “It’s so, so good, Dad.”

“Amazing,” Simon agreed, as he heaped more macaroni and cheese onto his plate. Shane snorted, looking down the table.

“Martha Stewart would have a fucking aneurysm, though. What *is* this menu, farm boy?”

Maru let out a strangled laugh that she turned into a cough, holding her napkin up to cover her face. Charlie did his best to look haughty and indignant. *“This menu* is everybody’s favorites,” he said primly. “Super Meal for V, fancy mac and cheese for Simon, California rolls for Amelia. There’s pie for Maru later, too. And a salad so we don’t all fall into a carb coma for the next week.” It didn’t exactly *go together,* no, but everyone was happy, so Charlie thought it was perfect.

“What about me?” Shane demanded.

“Nothing for you, because I knew you’d bitch about something no matter what I made. Also, you eat anything. Don’t think I haven’t seen you get thirds of mac and cheese.”

“What makes it ‘fancy?’” Lucia inquired, derailing whatever retort Shane had been about to give. “It’s delicious, I’m just curious what the difference is.”

“Truffles,” Simon said. “Shaved ones in it, and truffle oil in the breadcrumbs.”

“Agnes finds them,” Amelia added. “Our pig.”

“A pig?” Her interest apparently piqued, Lucia glanced toward the barn. “How do you train a pig to hunt truffles? Doesn’t she eat them?”

“Oh! It’s actually a fascinating process,” Harvey volunteered, leaning forward eagerly. “Some people use dogs, but pigs have more sensitive noses, and actually they’re better at it *because* they want to eat them, the trick is…”

Charlie sat back and sipped at his wine, letting the atmosphere wash over him. The conversation had splintered off into a few little groups: Lucia and Harvey with their pig talk; Shane and Amelia discussing the merits of the California roll versus the Philadelphia, and which Gus made better; Maru asking Simon for tour stories. For once, Charlie didn’t feel the need to be part of the conversation. He was content just to listen, letting his attention drift between threads as the evening wore on. The sun was just beginning to set, the days growing shorter as they progressed into the fall. He found himself wishing he could pause its progression for a moment—that he could keep everything just like this, sitting around the table with his best friends, his children, and the love of his life.

And what a life it had been. The really amazing thing about it—the thing that sometimes kept him awake at night, tucking his face against the back of Harvey’s neck and marveling silently—was that it just kept getting better. He thought of Harvey, years and years ago, worrying that he’d maxed out his allotted quota of happiness. Charlie had never believed in such a thing, but now it had been disproved beyond a shadow of a doubt. He’d thought he was

happy when he'd met Harvey; then he'd married him and reached heights he'd never imagined. Then Simon had come along, and Charlie had been certain that this was it, the best his life could possibly be. Four years later, when they'd gotten the call asking whether they might want another baby, he'd been almost afraid to say yes. Their lives were perfect; what if throwing another kid into the mix messed everything up somehow? But then they'd brought Amelia home, and watched her curl her chubby fist around Simon's finger for the first time, and Charlie realized what a fool he'd been. Of *course* they needed Amelia. How had they ever muddled along without her?

And then his children had grown up, and Charlie had seen them become these funny, sweet, wonderful, talented people. Realizing that he and Harvey had done an okay job, that they'd raised such a good pair of humans, had filled him with relief and joy in equal measure. But Charlie was older and wiser now, and he knew better than to assume that *this* was the pinnacle of happiness. Every twist and turn of his life had made it better; surely it had a few more in store. He glanced across the table at Maru and Shane, now gleefully heckling Amelia about her giant pumpkin ("I mean, it's *big,* but Cinderella couldn't go to the ball in it or anything; try harder, kid"), at Simon, who had fallen silent. Sy wore a look Charlie recognized. It was one he reserved for only the most precious things on Earth: his sister as a baby; Beverly as a puppy; his first guitar, given to him by his Grandma Alice for his eighth birthday. Following the line of his gaze, Charlie saw that he was watching Lucia. She talked animatedly with Harvey, playing a set of imaginary drums in the air to illustrate whatever point she was making, and Harvey seemed to be almost choking on his wine with laughter.

When Charlie looked back at Simon, he seemed to finally realize he had an audience. He jumped a little, turning beet red, but smiled. *Progress, maybe,* Charlie thought to himself. He wrapped an arm around Harvey's shoulders, and Harvey twisted around to face him, eyes warm in the glow of the lights overhead.

"Having a good time, my love?" he asked. Charlie pressed a kiss to his forehead, breathing him in, trying to memorize everything about the moment.

"The best," he murmured at last.

Party or no party, farm life went on, and Charlie had work to do. After dinner, he went out to the barn, getting all the animals settled in for the night. Though the fields had grown past the point he and Harvey could work alone, they'd never expanded their barn. It was home to four cows, two sheep, one pig, and two goats; if they'd raised any more than that, they wouldn't have been able to give each animal individual attention. Profit margins be damned: they could make their money from wine and vegetables. The barn animals were mostly overgrown pets, and everyone knew it (especially the animals).

He was just finishing up, pausing to give Dottie the cow some extra scratches around the ears (they'd run out of famous planes years ago, but Amelia had a list of potential pet names a mile long), when he heard the barn door creak open behind him. He turned, expecting Harvey or Amelia, and was surprised to see Lucia hovering on the threshold instead.

“Hi there,” he called, giving her a little wave. “Looking for Simon? Last I saw him, he was in the house, but—”

“Actually,” she said, coming inside and pulling the door shut behind her, “I was hoping you and I could talk for a sec. If that’s okay.”

“Of course,” Charlie said, curious. “What’s up? Oh, watch your shirt,” he added, as Gertrude, the youngest of the goats, decided it was worth a taste. Lucia gave a startled laugh, tugging her hem up out of the danger zone. Gertie seemed more or less content with head scratches as a substitute, leaning on Lucia’s legs.

“Sy’s talked about the village a lot,” she said. “He really misses it here.”

“We miss him, too.” The understatement of the year.

“He’s mentioned that there are some, well, kind of unorthodox traditions.”

“Oh?”

“Yeah. Certain things you have to do if you want to…” She trailed off here, clearing her throat and twisting a lock of hair that fell forward over her shoulder. “If you want to ask someone out, for example.”

Oh. *Oh.* It wasn’t entirely unexpected—of all Simon’s bandmates, only Lucia had taken the two-day trek home with him, after all—but Charlie had sort of assumed Simon would eventually get up the nerve to ask himself. The idea that Lucia was equally infatuated, that she’d traveled thousands of miles and waited all day to get one of Simon’s dads alone so she could do this the traditional way, made Charlie giddy with excitement. With effort, he reined it in. Kind of. “I assume we’re speaking strictly hypothetically,” he said, grinning. She returned it, a little nervous, but genuine.

“Of course.”

“Of course. Well. Some of our traditions *are* a little weird, but that one’s pretty straightforward. You just have to give someone a bouquet of flowers.”

She blinked at him, clearly not expecting this. “Flowers?” she repeated blankly.

“Yep. Usually you’d get them from Pierre’s shop, but there are alternatives.”

“Pierre’s...that shop on the Square?”

“That’s the one.”

“Shit.” Lucia grimaced, checking her watch. “He’s probably closed up for the night, huh.”

“Actually, he’s always closed on festival days, so you wouldn’t have been able to go today. Hypothetically speaking.” Lucia gave him a rueful smile. “There’s always tomorrow morning, if you still want to go. Or…” He trailed off, feigning nonchalance. The last thing he wanted was to come off as pushy, even if he was dying of excitement. Amelia and Simon had

both told him on multiple occasions that there was such a thing as *too helpful,* and he'd done his best to take it to heart. (Really.)

Fortunately, Lucia took the bait. "Or…?" she prompted.

Charlie smiled. "Or, I do happen to know somewhere else you could get a bouquet this time of night."

"Oh? Heck yeah! Where?"

Fifteen minutes later, Charlie stood on the packed-earth path through his flower field, watching as Lucia perused the rows with his floral snips in hand. "So do any of them, like, mean anything?" she asked, crouching down to squint at a black-eyed susan in the dim light. "Am I going to send some kind of bad message if I pick the wrong ones?"

"No, no," Charlie said, waving a hand dismissively. "Nothing like that. Except…" A thought had dawned on him, and he felt his cheeks heat a little. "Maybe not sunflowers?"

"Why, what do sunflowers mean?"

"Nothing really, but that's, um. That's what Harvey calls me." Lucia's entire face lit up at this, her mouth falling open, and Charlie leveled his best glare at her. "Stop that."

"No, I'm sorry, but that's the cutest thing I've ever heard in my life."

"We're adorable. I know." Lucia went back to shuffling through the flowers, still beaming, and Charlie reconsidered. "Maybe not sweet peas either, although I think those are all gone by now anyway."

"Is that what you call Harvey?"

"No! It's what we call *Amelia,"* Charlie protested, but Lucia found this hilarious too. Over her peals of laughter, he played his strongest card. "If you don't stop laughing," he called, "I'll never tell you what we call Sy."

"Oh," she said, her eyes narrowing. "That's cruel."

"Mm. I'm ruthless, all right. Just ask my kids."

"Fine," she sighed. "No sunflowers, no sweet peas. Anything else?"

"That's it. Just go with whatever grabs you."

In the end, Lucia ended up with a fistful of fairy roses, poppies, and zinnias, a few towering stems of lupine, and a couple types of grasses to fill it out. She had a good eye, Charlie thought admiringly; her bouquet was much less pedestrian than the ones Pierre sold. Simon was going to love it (although Simon would have loved a dandelion from the side of the road, if Lucia had been the one to give it to him). They took it back to the barn, where Charlie

helped her tie it together with some twine. It wasn't exactly luxurious, but he thought it had a rustic kind of charm.

"Listen," Lucia said, tucking her hair behind her ear, "this means a lot to me. That you would...help me with this. I know you don't know me that well, but I really care about Simon." She smiled at him again. "Now I just have to hope he says yes, I guess."

Charlie laughed, harder than he'd intended, and Lucia looked at him curiously. "Lucia," he began, "you're from Misko Falls in the Fern Islands, right?"

"Yeah?"

"Your birthday is in the second week of fall, your favorite color is black, you hate cilantro but you pretend you like it because your mom puts it in everything, and you secretly love the band Chicago."

Lucia tilted her head. "What is this? How do you know all that?"

"Simon," Charlie said. "He never, ever stops talking about you. When you guys make it big, I can write your Wikipedia page from memory." Lucia's expression softened, and Charlie patted her on the arm. "You've got nothing to worry about, kid. Trust me on this one."

Lucia blushed, smiling at him as she took the flowers back. "Simon always said you guys were the best dads in the world."

Charlie felt a lump come to his throat at this, for what felt like the millionth time that day. "Well, what does he know," he said briskly, winking to cover it. "He's only got two."

By the time they made their way back to the house, the party was breaking up. Shane and Maru had already left, and through the window Charlie could see the rest of his family: Amelia lay curled on the living room rug in front of the fire with Beverly, and Simon and Harvey were finishing up the dishes. Charlie gestured to the nearby cherry tree, his hand on the doorknob.

"Go wait over there," he said in a conspiratorial whisper. "I'll send him to check on the chicken coop, he'll find you."

Lucia beamed at him. "Got it. Thanks."

As she turned to go, Charlie remembered something. "Oh, by the way," he added, and she turned back with a curious look on her face, "it was 'string bean.'" At her blank expression, he added, "You know, 'sunflower,' 'sweet pea,' and…"

She looked as though Winter Star had come early. "Oh my god," she whispered, clutching the bouquet in both hands. *"String bean.* You guys really *are* adorable."

"Believe me, I know."

When he stepped inside, Charlie stood for a moment, watching his husband's and son's tall figures at the sink. From the time Simon had been old enough to hold a dish without dropping

it, their routine had been the same: Charlie cooked, Harvey washed, Simon dried. Charlie had always made himself scarce during the washing, because that was Simon-and-Papa time, a sliver of the day that was just for the two of them to talk. Charlie and Harvey had fully intended to have Amelia trade off with him once she was old enough, but Simon had turned out to be surprisingly possessive about his one-on-one time with Harvey. And so, dish drying duty had remained Simon's responsibility, and Amelia had started joining Harvey for the morning barn rounds, her own solo Papa time.

It did something funny to Charlie's chest to see Simon back in his old spot. Charlie had known, academically, that he would miss his kids when they left home. He'd been proud of Simon when he left, was still proud of him, was glad to see him finding his way in the world. But he'd never realized that, in making room for these kids in his heart, they would leave such an aching hollow space when they weren't there. That while he was still fantastically, radiantly happy, a piece of him would always be occupied with wishing they were home. It didn't matter that Simon stood three inches taller than Harvey, that the laughter floating across the kitchen now came in a deep baritone. Walking into the house to the familiar scene, Charlie saw six-year-old Simon, accepting a dripping plate from his father and giggling at some shared joke.

He closed the door behind him and both men turned, smiling. "I wondered where you'd run off to, sunflower," Harvey called. "Everything okay in the barn?"

"All good, darlin', just wanted to make sure it was warm enough in there. Supposed to drop a few degrees tonight." He crossed the kitchen, going up on tiptoe to kiss Harvey on the cheek; Simon rolled his eyes, but Charlie knew it was just a habit left over from his teen years. Men who were genuinely embarrassed by their parents' affection didn't travel thousands of miles to play a love song for their anniversary, after all. "Mind doing me a favor, Sy? I'm pretty worn out, but I forgot to check on the birds. Can you run out and make sure they're all closed up for the night?"

"Sure, no problem. We're almost done anyway."

"I can take over," Charlie said, holding out his hand for the towel. Simon handed it over, heading for the door and picking up his jacket on the way.

"If you're too tired, I don't mind finishing up," Harvey said, nudging him with an elbow. The door closed behind them, and Charlie listened intently to the sound of Simon's steps crossing the porch. "There's only a few—"

"Not tired," Charlie said in an urgent whisper, his eyes darting to Amelia; she looked fast asleep, her fingers curled into Beverly's fur. Simon's steps had crunched down onto the path toward the chicken coop. He tossed the towel onto the counter, seizing Harvey's damp hand and tugging him toward the stairs. "Come on!"

"Char, what—"

"Shh! I'll tell you upstairs."

They crept up the stairs as quickly as they could without waking Amelia, Charlie towing Harvey after him into the study. Harvey reached for the light switch, but Charlie batted his hand away and barreled toward the window. When they reached it, he dropped into a crouch, pulling Harvey down with him.

“Charlie, what in the world is going on?”

“I didn’t forget to lock the coop,” Charlie whispered. “Lucia’s going to ask Simon out. I was helping her make a bouquet.”

Even in the semidarkness, the look of surprised delight on Harvey’s face was deeply gratifying. “Yoba,” he whispered back. “That’s—wow. Right now?”

“Right now. We can see them from here, look.” Charlie pointed down at the cherry tree, a short distance away but still clearly visible in the moonlight. Lucia stood underneath it, her hair blowing gently in the cool breeze and one hand tucked behind her back, and Charlie knew Simon would come around the corner any moment. He glanced at Harvey, who still wore that thunderstruck expression. “Unless you think we should give them their privacy,” he added in an undertone. Harvey flapped an impatient hand at him, not taking his eyes off the window.

“You know damn well neither one of us is going to go back downstairs and do *dishes* right now.”

Charlie snickered, bumping his shoulder against Harvey’s. They huddled together at the window sill, keeping as low as they could to avoid being seen. Simon came around the corner, hands in the pockets of his jacket, and Lucia straightened. Charlie could tell the exact moment when Simon saw her: his head came up, his gait slowed. When he was about six feet away, he stopped, giving a little wave. In the dark, Harvey’s hand found Charlie’s, gripping it tight. The feeling was mutual—Charlie was all but vibrating with excitement.

Lucia spoke. Between the distance and the closed window, Charlie couldn’t hear anything, but he could see her lips moving. She smiled, ducking her head; her hair fell across her face, and she made no effort to tuck it back. With her visible hand, she gestured between the two of them. Whatever she was saying, she’d apparently planned it, because the speech went on for some time. Certainly longer than Charlie’s bouquet-giving speech, which had consisted only of *“Please go out with me, Harvey, you’d make me so happy.”*

...Although, actually, what else had needed to be said? And it had worked, so never mind. It had been a perfect speech and Charlie was a genius.

“I wish we could see his face,” Harvey whispered. “Which expression do you think it is? The big surprised happy one, like when we got Beverly, or—you know, the—” Charlie turned to Harvey, widening his eyes and letting his mouth go just slightly slack in an imitation of their son’s shocked face, and Harvey laughed. “Yes, that’s the one,” he agreed. “Has to be.”

“Oh oh oh, there!” Charlie hissed, squeezing Harvey’s forearm, because Lucia had brought out the flowers. She fiddled with them for a moment, still talking, and then held them out to Simon; she waited, smiling, and both Charlie and Harvey held their breath.

Simon stepped forward, covering the hand that held the flowers with his own. With his other hand, he tucked her hair behind her ear; then, he tilted her chin up and kissed her.

Up in the study, Charlie pumped both fists into the air. Harvey let out a victorious whoop that he quickly choked off, casting a sheepish glance down the stairs to where Amelia slept. Charlie flung his arms around Harvey's neck, and they rocked each other, silently sharing their excitement. Charlie genuinely wasn't one of those parents who was desperate to marry off his kids, or see them "settled." He wanted them to do their own thing in their own time, and just to be happy, whatever that meant for each of them. But Simon wasn't the type to give his heart away without a second thought, and he so clearly loved Lucia. Charlie had spent six months growing equal parts happy for Simon and concerned that this Lucia person might be stringing him along, or maybe just not interested. He was thrilled to know that wasn't the case.

When they broke apart, Simon and Lucia still stood under the cherry tree, embracing. Charlie decided it was time to *actually* give them some privacy. Without speaking, he and Harvey stood. They intertwined their fingers, leaving the darkened study and making their way quietly back down the stairs. Harvey went into the kitchen, propped the last few plates into the drying rack, and turned off the light above the sink; Charlie stepped into the living room, watching the firelight on Amelia's sleeping face. After a moment, he pulled the blanket off the back of the couch, shaking it out and spreading it over her. Beverly lifted her head, blinking sleepily, and Charlie gave her a scratch between the ears.

"Don't worry, good girl," he murmured. "Go back to sleep."

Beverly did. Charlie stroked a hand gently over Amelia's hair, tugging the blanket a little higher, and then Harvey was beside him. They tiptoed together into the bedroom, closing the door carefully to keep from waking their daughter. Even with the solid door shut, neither of them said a word as they went about their routine and changed into their pajamas. Charlie knew, somehow, that they were both feeling the same curious blend of emotions: joy that Simon was happy and loved; the bittersweet knowledge that he was really, truly grown up. And of course, there was the layer of reminiscence for their own relationship, for those early days when everything had been exhilarating and new.

But watching Harvey pull back the covers and climb into bed—maybe moving just a little more slowly these days, but in better shape than ever thanks to farm work and yoga—he knew it would never stop being exhilarating. Familiarity had done nothing to dim the spark between them; it had built that spark into a roaring fire, comforting and bright. It had kept him warm and lit his way for twenty-six years, and it always would.

They fit themselves together in bed, Harvey's head on Charlie's chest, all four of their ankles tangled up. As Charlie stroked up and down Harvey's spine, he searched for something meaningful to say. Something that would mark the occasion, and express his joy at having their family all under one roof again.

What came out instead was, *"Jesus,* their kids are going to be tall."

Harvey shook the bed with his silent giggles, and Charlie joined in, burying his face in his husband's silver hair to muffle his laughter. When they subsided, Harvey sighed, pulling back

to meet his eye.

“Grandkids,” he said, in a tone of hushed delight. “I can’t wait.”

“You’re gonna have to. They just started dating. We can’t possibly be *those parents,* who harass them about having babies from day one.”

“Of course not,” Harvey said, nudging his ankle with his toes. “We would never. But it’s fun to think about.”

“Mm. It is.”

Harvey searched his face, and his smile softened. “You know,” he began, “I didn’t expect to be saying this at sixty-four, but I guess we still have some new adventures left.”

“Oh, yes, Number One,” Charlie murmured, leaning in to kiss him good night. “We’re just getting started.”

A few miscellaneous notes!

The title of this fic comes from a beautiful Shearwater song, *You As You Were*. Real, authorized explanations of the lyrics are hard to find, but I’ve always interpreted it as being about reinvention—hitting an impasse in your life and deciding to become someone new. Harvey, Charlie, Shane and Maru all go through that process in different ways in this story, so I thought it was a good fit.

I don't share my artwork publicly much, so thanks for indulging me a little! I doodled these guys a lot while I was writing, and thought it would be fun to color a few sketches to share here.

I always like seeing people's interpretations of what the characters would look like in real life. Here are the pictures I have in my head!

Harvey: Lee Pace (during his time with a glorious mustache)

Shane: Liam Garrigan (during his role in *The Terror)*

Maru: a young Sade or Zadie Smith

Charlie: Charlie is so difficult! I haven't been able to find anyone who matches the picture in my head exactly. The closest I can come is 90s baby Brad Pitt with this haircut (just a little darker).

Simon: A bit like Matthew Daddario , but even taller and with long hair

Amelia: Another tough one. Most like a slightly younger Zsané Jhé , but with longer hair too

Lucia: Somewhere between Liu Wen and a very young Cher , but, y'know, grunge

Chapter End Notes

I couldn't possibly end this story without trying to tell you all what it's meant to me to share it with you right now. 2020 has been a strange, difficult year, and posting this story gave me something to look forward to each day. To all of you who left comments (some of you on every chapter!), thank you so, so much. They've made me so happy, and I'm so pleased I could write a story that meant something to you. And to those of you who read and/or left kudos, thank you, too. I appreciate it more than I can say.

For more than two years and through many ups and downs, Charlie and Harvey's little world has been my happy place. I can't promise anything right now, but I suspect I might have a few more short stories about them in me. I'm putting this one in a series just in case; if you want to read more about them, you're welcome to subscribe to it! I promise to respond to all your lovely comments soon. After almost 300,000 words, I can't think of any more to express my gratitude, so I'll just leave it here with: thank you, I love you, and as always, Dr. Harvey says wash your hands. <3

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!